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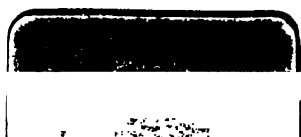
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LONDON : PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

TOUCH AND GO

BY

JEAN MIDDLEMASS

Author of 'Wild Georgie' 'Mr Dorillion' &c.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1877



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THE SECOND VOLUME.

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TOUCH AND GO.

CHAPTER I.

DEB.

SHE was lean and hungry-looking enough as she stood against the railings at the corner of a London street. Pretty well known to the people who dwelt in the neighbourhood, she went by the familiar name of Deb. A mere bundle of untidy, uncleanly rags, she probably would seem to the casual passer-by, yet not a few of the more observant strollers along life's highway would turn more than once to have another look at her as she either

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swept her crossing with brisk energy or leant, as she was now doing, resting upon her broom. Why people looked twice at her she was too simple-minded to inquire, but that she did evoke a more than ordinary amount of interest sundry stray coppers which found their way into her ragged pocket practically proved. It was a tatterdemalion bonnet she wore, large in size, squashed and shapeless, yet she had managed to bend it picturesquely, and it slouched down on one side over her face, which was lighted up by a pair of wonderfully expressive eyes, veiled by the longest, fullest lashes which have ever been bestowed on woman—hence, probably, the second, and even third glances of the passers-by. Yet Deb was scarcely beautiful as men-critics prate of beauty. She wanted that fleshiness and warmth of tint which luxury and abundance help to develop; with her

poverty and daily abstinence had robbed her frame of all its roundness, and given her face that half-starved, soured expression in which there is so much of sadness. Varied as the vagaries of the English clime, though, were Deb's moods, and he who pitied her to-day for her woebegone, un-girlish melancholy would perhaps be inclined to chide her to-morrow for the frolicsomeness which was so nearly akin to levity.

A man muffled in rich furs—for the day is cold and the east wind cutting—has just come out of an adjacent house and passes hastily over Deb's crossing.

It is Harry Durant.

For a moment he pauses and slips a silver coin into her palm.

'Thank you kindly, sir,' she says, demurely dropping a curtesy and entirely

hiding her eyes under their long fringes as she looks down.

He smiles and giving her a careless nod, passes quickly on, among the whirl and business of life, speedily forgetting the existence of Deb, the little sweeper. She, however, is very subdued and quiet for many minutes after he has gone. She solicits pence from no one, but, holding her bit of silver tightly in her hand, stands there as though lost in the labyrinths of some strange dream. Then with her usual fitfulness she suddenly casts off her pensive mood, begins sweeping as though her life depended on her energy, half-singing the while to herself the refrain of one of those merry airs which the organ-grinders contribute to the musical education of the masses. Then she broke into a laugh, and, with the music of a march this time for accompaniment to her actions, she strode

back to her usual position by the railings. During her temporary absence, however, it had been filled, and a little wizen man, scarcely less untidy in appearance than Deb herself, was standing there. The clothes he wore had once been good, but had arrived at the stage of shabby gentility, while it was very evident that brushes, combs, and soap were articles in which, as a rule, this small specimen of male humanity did not traffic. Deb looked the intruder all over curiously. His being there at all, in her vernacular, she would probably have designated as 'cheek,' had not the fear that perhaps he had come to deprive her of her crossing made her silent. But as the man neither moved nor spoke she determined to address him.

'This yere is my corner and my home—you ain't a sweeper, be yer?'

‘On the great highroad of the world I would sweep, sweep on for ever for the sake of my dear art,’ said the man, ambiguously, using as he did so a strong foreign accent.

‘Law!’ said Deb, dropping her broom on the pavement with a jerk; ‘there ain’t room for two here—I can manage this crossing pretty well alone, thank yer.’

‘My child, I want your broom not—but your voice,’ he said, picking up her instrument of labour and handing it to her with as much courtesy as though she had been a duchess.

This speech produced another ‘Law!’ from the astonished Deb, to be followed by a muttered recommendation ‘that he should sweep the cobwebs out of his own head!’

‘Will you to my school come, kindchen? You will be welcome as the stars at evening.’

‘Ain’t got no time for schools—the

parson he be always asking of me. In rags, too, at a school—how purty I should look !’

‘ Art, mein kind, brings not unfrequently gold to her disciples. She is a kind, good mistress.’

‘ Is she now ? Well, whoever the lady may be, I shouldn’t ha’ thought so to look at you. When I leaves my crossing for another line o’ business I should like it to be money-getting.’

‘ Greed, little one, is a curse. For love only must we work if we would be rewarded. Love for one’s art, one’s beautiful art—oh, it is a priceless blessing to feel and have it.’

‘ I don’t sweep for love, I sweeps for food. But whatever is art, and where is it to be found ?’

‘ Here—here—everywhere—it is a holy inspiration.’

‘ Well, I don’t understand nothink—they’re beyond me, these big words.’

He took her by the shoulder and looked into her speaking eyes.

‘ What for do you sing, meine liebe?’

‘ To make the long hours seem short, I suppose.’

‘ Who gave you the knowledge to make tuneful melody?’

‘ I dunno. It came like walking, or running, or sweepin’.’

‘ It is the spirit of art which has descended on you. I have watched you often. You are born an *artiste*—the inspiration which is in you will with education produce æsthetic result.’

‘ My heart! and to think that I am all that! How ever did you find it out?’

‘ You shall hear music, child—beautiful music, which shall impress your senses and

wake that power of love which in your breast has been till now sleeping.'

Deb pushed her large bonnet off her head and stood looking at him in silent wonder; then she pulled it on again with a jerk as she muttered, 'Mad—mad as a hatter,' between her closed lips.

'Liebchen, have you ever heard a spirit-stirring melody?'

'Don't know rightly what it is, but if it's musicianers as you mean—don't the German band play rare, that's all! And ain't I learnt all the tunes, and I sings 'em to myself afore I go to sleep of nights.'

'I knew it, I knew it. When my predictions were they ever unfulfilled?'

'Hallo, Wurzel! So you have got hold of little Deb. Best leave her, my good fellow; you will not do her any good.'

The speaker was Harry Durant, return-

ing hurriedly to his domicile for something he had forgotten.

‘Leave her—leave the beautiful in art to hide under a bushel its wondrous sweetness! Nein, nein, mein Herr. What for have I, then, founded my school and devoted the earnings of my life?’

‘As you will, as you will, my good Wurzel; only I would be sure of success before I took the girl from her broom. She can never go back to it, you know.’ And he passed on.

Deb’s brow had puckered itself into a frown; her eyes flashed with an unwonted fire.

‘He is a great artist himself, yet he would stones throw for others to stumble over. Fie on such coldness; I love it not,’ said the German, more to himself than to Deb. ‘Yet perhaps he is right. If the child has not a

voice what shall her art do for her in this working world?' And he half-turned away.

'You ain't agoing without giving me nothink after all they big promises? That is too bad.' And Deb put herself in front of him.

'No, the art-love must conquer. If I fail it is but a sacrifice at the great shrine. And what matter? I will find work for the girl. It is well, child; come to me at seven—this very night we will see. You will hear voices like the strains of the angels; we will discover if yours shall commingle, and for the future we will decide.'

And Deb returned to her sweeping. But the presages of a coming change hung about her, and her work had already lost in importance and energy. Presently Mr. Durant passed again, but he did not bestow, as he was wont to do, a nod or a smile upon

the girl; for, living as he did but a few doors from her crossing, he was one of her patrons, and had, in fact, selected her in his own mind for a 'model' when the whim should seize him to settle down and return with industry to his easel. Hence, perhaps, some of his annoyance at finding old Wurzel, the mad German, had marked the girl for instruction in the art of music. Now, however, something had evidently put Harry Durant's usually well-accorded temperament out of tune, for he strode on, with his furs wrapped tightly round him and his hands in his pockets, without casting any glances on the passers-by, be they who they might.

Deb watched him till he was out of sight.

'Well, the likes o' he has his ups and downs as well as I. Something has made the yeast rise—I wonders what?—hope it's no

bad news he's got, just when fortin' has smiled on me too. I'd help him if I know'd how. But lawks, ain't I a silly to talk?' And she went into an immoderate fit of laughter, till the tears coursed each other down her pale cheeks.

Some two hours later Harry Durant returned slowly. He sauntered along the street as though clogs had been fastened to his ankles and held him. It was evident the business on which he had been engaged had not proved successful; and Deb, who had not yet relinquished her broom, marked the change which had come over him, even though the gathering twilight had begun to render objects somewhat difficult to discern.

He stopped when he came to where she was standing.

'Would you like to earn a silver coin, girl?' he asked. 'If so, I will send you on an errand.'

‘ Yes, sir, thank you, if so be as I can be back by seven.’

‘ Oh, it will not take long. But why should you be back by seven?’

‘ Please, for the music at the German’s, sir.’

‘ Oh, I forgot ; Wurzel is going to make a fool of you like the rest. You had much better not go.’

‘ Please, sir, I must; there’s somethin’ as is a drivin’ me to it.’

Harry Durant shrugged his shoulders.

‘ Well, let me know how you get on; and if you want any help you’ll know where to find it. It will not be long first, I expect. Come to my house in a quarter of an hour for the letter I want to send.’

There was an imperious tone about Mr. Durant which was unlike him and savoured of bitterness—it was evident things had not

gone well with him on that particular day.

A quarter of an hour later Deb presented herself at the door, and was shown according to orders into Mr. Durant's sitting-room. It was the first time in her life that she had peeped into the dwellings of the rich ; and, holding her ragged skirts close to her, lest they should contaminate the walls of a place which to her unsophisticated mind seemed like some fairy palace, she stood half-trembling on the threshold.

‘Come in ; don’t be afraid. I want to give you your instructions. I wonder if you can manage to hold your tongue?’

‘I should think so,’ answered Deb, ‘specially when I ain’t got no one to tell.’

‘But you might some day be cross-questioned. What then?’

‘If you said I was to know nothin’ I’d know nothin’.’

‘That means if I paid you for your silence.’

‘I don’t want no pay. You’ve been good to me and given me many a coin. Sure I could do a turn for you.’

‘Can you read?’

‘Lord bless yer, it don’t do to ask, ’cos if they School Boards didn’t think as I was over age they’d have me up.’

‘And you don’t want to learn?’

‘Ain’t I going to be a musicianer?—that’s learnin’.’

Mr. Durant laughed, and probably would have entered *con amore* into the subject of the girl’s hopes and fears in life, if some secret annoyance had not prevented him from being especially interested in anything at that particular moment.

‘ Well, take this letter to 24 Clare Street, ask to see Miss Wilson, give it into her hands, bring me back an answer, and you shall have half-a-crown for your trouble.’

‘ I’ll take the letter with pleasure, but I won’t have the half-crown, thank you, sir. Folks might say as I’d stole it.’

‘ Well, run along ; we’ll settle the money question afterwards.’

Deb did as she was bid, and in less than ten minutes her nimble feet brought her to Clare Street. The houses were small but tidy, and from the general aspect of the place it might be inferred that most of their inmates were in that state of life known as genteel poverty.

Deb rang the bell at number 24 and asked to see Miss Wilson. After a somewhat fierce altercation with a slatternly

servant-girl not much older than herself, that functionary consented to inform Miss Wilson that 'a young lady' wished to speak to her, and Deb was accordingly ushered up into the second floor. It was a cosy little room; a bright fire was burning in the grate, but there was no other light, and like a dim shadow she saw the form of a recumbent woman on a sofa, but no one spoke.

'Please, mem, I'm Deb, and I've brought a letter,' said the little sweeper, half-startled by the sound of her own words.

'Who is it from?' asked a nasal voice which sounded somewhat harshly on Deb's ear.

'Dunno the gentleman's name, but he lives hard by my crossing.'

'Whoever he is he has chosen a queer messenger. Here, give me the letter and stir up the fire; I cannot move easily.'

Deb did as she was bid, wishing the while that the slatternly maid would bring in a candle. 'Shadows from the fitful fire-light' awed her, for she managed to see that the human form on the sofa was little more than a shadow herself, and she could not help wondering what lien there could be between that handsome, pleasant gentleman and this dreary-looking woman.

'Tisn't love, for she's too old,' she thought; 'and she ain't his mother, for she's a miss. Lawks, isn't it rum, tho'!'

And while Deb was pondering and taking in all the surroundings Miss Wilson had opened the letter.

'Mr. Durant,' she muttered almost below her breath. 'After all these years what can have occurred that he should write?'

'Get me a light, idiot; how can I see

in the dark?' she went on, turning sharply on Deb.

Deb, trembling with fright, pushed a candle between the bars of the grate to light it; but this untidy trick passed unnoticed by Miss Wilson, who lay on her couch engrossed in her letter, while Deb held the blackened candle and took a survey meanwhile of the hard-featured, sour-visaged woman. Stricken by some illness which had deprived her of her agility to such an extent that she could only walk by the use of sticks, she had become under affliction crossgrained and vindictive to a degree those who had known her in the palmy days of her youth would scarcely have imagined possible.

'Tell him he is a fool to put his hand in other people's trap-holes,' she said, having read the letter to the end. 'If he wants help

from me he had best come and seek it. I won't write a line. Do you understand ?'

'I hear what you says ; but it ain't very perlite language to take to a gentleman,' answered Deb.

'I wonder where you learnt politeness, you little drab? Do as I tell you.'

'The gentleman told me to fetch an answer. Such talk as that isn't worth the carryin'. If he wants you to help him you might do it—surely I would if I know'd how.'

Miss Wilson half-rose from her back with a sudden spring and sat glaring at the girl.

'How dare you speak to me like that, you minx? I'll teach Mr. Durant to send such messengers as you.'

'Don't ee, don't ee, now—I am that frightened. Just give me a line to the gentleman and let me go. I have business

of my own, and I'm in an awful hurry. It's only for he as I'd ha' come.'

'I will not write a word, I tell you. Go to Mr. Durant, tell him to come if he wants aught of me, but that if he was not in love with a false face he would not mix himself up in the matter. Now go.'

But Deb did not turn to depart as speedily as might have been expected; she stood gazing on Miss Wilson for a minute or two as though she were trying to take in slowly the sense of her last words; then, without any sharp answer or other remark save a brief 'Good night, mem,' she went down stairs into the street, walking more demurely than she had ever done in her life before, murmuring to herself as she did so—

'In love with a false face—in love with a false face.'

Strange that in giving Harry Durant a

somewhat detailed account of her interview with Miss Wilson she failed to tell him of the sentence which had haunted her and never left her lips during her walk back from Clare Street.

CHAPTER II.

GATHERING THUNDER-CLOUDS.

‘I CAN do nothing for the boy beyond continuing his allowance of 300*l.* a year, an income which he has known pretty well how to squander during the last three years. Times are bad with these cursed foreign bonds down at zero, besides he ought to learn to do something for himself.’

‘Three hundred a year is scarcely what *your* son would be expected to marry on,’ suggested Mr. Durant, quietly. According to his promise to May he was seeking to investigate how matters stood with the elder Duncombe.

‘Perhaps not, perhaps not ; but who the devil wants him to marry? I don’t. If it is the lady’s family they had better provide the means.’

‘I did not commit myself by saying there was any especial lady in the case,’ answered Harry Durant, smiling ; ‘only I fancy Master Algy seems rather matrimonially inclined.’

‘Pooh, nonsense! Thirty is quite soon enough for any man to marry—Algy is too young.’

‘A man marries, I presume, at the time of life when he meets with a lady likely to suit him as a companion. Some are fortunate at an early period of their career, others have to wait.’

‘And numbers make a horrid mess of the whole concern,’ grumbled Mr. Duncombe, who was inclined to be very bearish and disagreeable ; and it required all Mr. Durant’s

tact and endurance to prevent himself from losing his temper.

‘At all events I may conclude that you would put the 300*l.* a year into settlement?’

‘Certainly not ; I have told you I don’t want the boy married, and I won’t do a thing. I shall not take principal out of my house to hand over to trustees, if that be what you expect. He can have 300*l.* a year from the business, and that is all he will get till I am underground.’

And with this ultimatum Mr. Durant was perforce compelled to take his leave.

That Mrs. Bertrand would listen to any proposal for a marriage with May on such terms he felt very sure was hopeless, but he had done his best, though he had utterly failed in the result, and was exceedingly prone to the idea that the firm of Duncombe and Co. was by no means in a flourishing

condition, and that it was inability rather than disinclination that made Mr. Duncombe determined not to help his son.

‘ Either May must give up all thought of Algy or they must wait till the tide turns—they are young enough,’ was Harry’s conclusion as he walked Westward after the not very pleasing interview he had had in the City counting-house.

Three weeks had passed since Harry Durant had left Paris ; and short though the time had been it had left its mark, for he looked fagged and worn, as though he had been both worried and over-fatigued by the stress of private business. Still he had not forgotten his promise to May, and after several useless roundabout inquiries had resolved to beard paterfamilias in his den and discover the best or the worst at once.

Harry Durant hated to be baulked in

anything he had undertaken to arrange, and was excessively annoyed at the non-success of his venture; in fact, with every step he took his anger seemed to increase, and by the time he reached Deb's crossing he was enjoying anything but his usual cheerful equanimity. The turn matters in which he was more individually interested had taken of late was scarcely a pleasing one, and a letter he had received from Paris that very morning was, perhaps, the real cause of the inward rankle which, with a certain amount of self-deception, he was vainly seeking to ascribe to Mr. Duncombe's rough reception of his suggestions for Algy's welfare. The letter which had vexed him was from the 'Grey Widow' herself, and was, perhaps, more offensive in tone than that there was any practical wrong to complain of. To use Mr. Durant's own expression, it was evident

she was 'kicking over the traces,' and how to hold her in more firmly in the future was the knowledge for which he had been beating about in his brain for the last two hours. He thought he had a tolerable amount of power over her, but it was obvious since he left Paris that something had occurred which had caused his ascendancy to wane. He must return at once to the French capital; but before he did so would not some farther hold over Mrs. Fitzalan be an accessory worth attaining? There was but one person in the world who could help him, and that was a certain Miss Wilson, of whose address, after a good deal of difficulty and some cost, he had only become possessed that morning.

Conning all these things over in his mind as he walked along, his eye fell on Deb. The messenger was worthy of the mission—he

would send her to Miss Wilson—with what result we already know—a result which by no means increased Harry Durant's placidity as he listened to Deb's tale.

‘How the deuce did she know the letter came from me? I never signed it.’

‘She twigged your mark, I s’pose, ’cos as I didn’t know your name I couldn’t tell her.’

‘Knew my writing, did she? Well, she must be a sharp one, for she never saw it but once, and that is ever so many years ago.’

‘Oh, she’s sharp as knives—shouldn’t like to handle her pertickler. But since she knows who you are you’d best go and see her yourself, if you wants anything.’

‘Which means *you* decline to go again?’

‘Not I; I’ll do anything, whatever you

like, if it's any mortal good ; but that there old woman beats most of the parties I know, and I see some funny ones too.'

'Well, I suppose I shall have to pay her a visit myself,' growled Durant, who was thoroughly out of humour. 'Here, girl, here's your money. It's not your fault you did not succeed.'

Deb looked at the coin he laid on the table till the tears gathered in her eyes, but she did not attempt to touch it.

'Thank you, sir. Good evening,' she said, after a minute's pause, and vanished, leaving Mr. Durant too absorbed to notice her. It was not till some half-hour later that he saw the half-crown still lying on the table and remarked to himself—

'Queer little girl that. I wonder why she won't take the money? Yes, I will see Miss Wilson before I return to Paris.

Now I suppose I must dress, and go and dine with the Bertrands.'

And by force of will he shook off the preoccupied look which the complications of life had given him of late, and entered his aunt's drawing-room bright and joyous as his friends ever knew him. It was an intimate little party of six, Mr. Durant and one other man being the only invited guests; and, perhaps because Harry Durant felt that he had not carried out the mission entrusted to him by May as successfully as either she or he could have wished, he talked rapidly and agreeably, to fill up the time before he should be compelled to tell her that Algy's fears about his father's affairs were all too well-founded. Mrs. Bertrand was in the happiest of moods. Harry had become so tractable and attentive of late that she thought the most sanguine expectations as to his

marrying one of the 'dear girls' were about to be realised, and she overwhelmed him with civilities accordingly. Altogether, to judge from external appearances, the unanimity and general good feeling which prevailed around that well-spread dinner-table, could scarcely be exceeded; and yet beneath the smooth, plausible surface how many hopes and fears, joys and sorrows lay concealed! Except the Squire, who never allowed the even current of his life to be troubled by petty intrigues and amalgamations, there was not one mind there that was not revolving on a private axis of which the beholders knew neither the workings nor the force; yet how smoothly the machinery seemed to run—for awhile! The stranger, whom Harry Durant had never seen before, was the first to jar the delicate inner work-

manship, by one of those random hits which make their mark unwittingly.

‘So report says Fleming is going to be married,’ he announced, carelessly.

‘Not to the “Grey Widow”—she would never dare!’ was Mr. Durant’s unguarded answer.

‘No, no, no, Fleming is far too sentimental an enthusiast to go in for widows. The future Lady Fleming is, they say, a bud just opening into beauty.’

‘Dear me, how interesting! Pray tell us the name of the bud?’ asked the hostess, with a slight sneer in her tone.

‘Well, my dear Mrs. Bertrand, you know it is only Paris gossip at secondhand. I got my information from a man who arrived this morning. I daresay you know more than I do about the girl from nobody knows where, whom Mrs. Fitzalan has made the fashion this winter.’

‘Cicely—our old lodge-keeper’s granddaughter—she is going to marry Sir Hubert Fleming! Impossible.’

‘Yet my informant is tolerably reliable,’ answered the man quietly, while both the girls exclaimed in chorus—

‘Oh, I am so glad! Dear little Cis—fancy her as Lady Fleming!’

The Squire, too, put in his word of rejoicing. There was but one voice at the table that was silent. Harry Durant ate his moustache voraciously, while his cheek paled and a fierce light shone in his angry eyes. Mrs. Bertrand beheld it for a moment and quailed. He was not, then, so wholly theirs as she had imagined. But who knows? this new entanglement might work out the hoped-for issue in time; and there was some sincerity in the tone in which she rejoiced with the rest over the good fortune which would

carry 'that hateful little pauper minx out of the way.' (This in a private parenthesis.)

Still Harry Durant did not utter—how could he trust himself to speak?—Blasphemies on Mrs. Fitzalan's duplicity were blazing too hotly in his mind for him to dare give vent to his feelings in the present society, for never for an instant did it enter his head to imagine that Cicely cared for Fleming. For some minutes, while numerous questions were being asked by the ladies, he was allowed to chew the cud of his annoyance unobserved; no one save the Squire remarked how two or three glasses of wine were drunk off consecutively, as though by their help to steady the equilibrium of a mind which for a time had nearly lost its balance.

It had been the end of dinner before this piece of gossip had been agitated, and shortly the ladies rose to leave the room. More

wine and no words on the part of Harry Durant, who, although not altogether an abstemious man, had never been known to infringe the limits prescribed by good sense and decorum. The Squire had changed the conversation ; with his usual quiet observance he had noted how distasteful was this topic to his nephew ; but the newsmonger who had come among them, like all gossips, hugged the idea of having told them something they did not know before, and would not let the subject go. He began to discuss Sir Hubert Fleming—his first marriage—its unhappy conclusion—in fact, all his antecedents down to the smallest known or guessed minutiae, till he rejoiced once again over the fresh life this engagement to Cicely would impart to the melancholy, till now unhappy Fleming.

‘ It is a d—— lie—the whole thing—

from beginning to end!’ thundered Harry Durant, whose patience under the influence of good wine was quite exhausted.

He who had brought the news started to his feet.

‘Sir, how dare you——’

But a ‘Come, come, let us join the ladies,’ and a wink from the Squire, checked the unfinished sentence; and the man who had only spoken on the authority of gossip perhaps regretted his careless announcement as he marked the situation, for his next words were conciliatory.

‘Perhaps it *is not* true,’ he said. ‘If you remember, I prefaced my statement as gossip.’

‘People should not speak of what they know nothing about. They are all friends of mine to whom you have alluded, and I think I should know more of their affairs than you do,’ grumbled Harry Durant.

The Squire rose ; and, slapping his nephew kindly on the shoulder, said—

‘Come along, Harry, my boy ; let us go and have some music.’

‘No, thank you, sir ; please let me be excused ; I have a splitting headache to-night, and am scarcely a fit companion for my aunt and cousins. Commend me to them, and let me go home.’

Thus the pleasant dinner, begun under favourable auspices, came to an untoward termination ; though not even Rose, who ‘interested’ herself, as she said, in Cousin Harry, guessed the real truth about his abrupt departure, for the two men were loyal and kept good faith—neither by look nor word did they hint at the ebullition of feeling they had just witnessed.

Once in the street, Harry Durant strode rapidly towards his home. It was too late to

seek Miss Wilson that night, but next morning he would see her at the earliest hour possible, and then once more *en route* for Paris. But *l'homme propose et Dieu dispose*. The star of Harry Durant's luck was not in the ascendant on that particular evening. About half-way between the house where he had been dining and his own lodgings he stopped.

‘Home—what was the use of going home? It was scarcely possible he would be able to endure solitude cooped up between four walls; and as for sleep, that was not likely to come and help him. There were lots of places open. The Club—d—— the Club—he would go where life was briskest, pleasure at its zenith—play, anything—what matter, so the time went?—till the morning.’

The influence of his uncle's good wine had not passed off, or he would have re-

membered that coolness and deliberation were the only weapons by which Mrs. Fitzalan was likely to be foiled, if she were really seeking to subvert his influence over Cicely, and that recklessness on his part would but prove his own destruction. Scarcely, however, in his soberest moments could he have guessed how thoroughly the worst was about to be realised. He walked along Piccadilly towards the Haymarket. The night was still young, and numerous vehicles of every kind were passing on their noisy way ; but Harry Durant heeded them not, and, plunging into their midst, began to cross the road. He had done it hundreds of times before ; but now a hansom coming at full speed round the corner dashed against him before he had time to get out of the way, and in another instant he was lying under the horse's feet. He was instantly raised

by some unknown friendly hand, but only to become cognisant of the fact that he could not stand; his leg was broken, and grateful might he be if this were the only injury he had received. He never lost consciousness for a moment, though wincing and writhing with pain, but bade them drive him at once to his lodgings and send for his own doctor, instead of taking him to the hospital, as some one among the crowd had benevolently suggested.

When the morning broke Harry was tossing sleeplessly on a fevered couch, muttering names and scraps of sentences, which revealed to the good doctor who attended him how difficult it would be to ensure the quietude necessary to reknit the fractured limb under an amount of mental pressure which seemed to keep the mind perpetually on the rack.

‘ Send for Deb—she’ll help me if she can—I want her to take a letter—send for Deb,’ he had perpetually repeated all through the day succeeding the accident; but no one heeded it—they thought it was in the mere utterance of delirium that he talked of the sweeper-girl. When, however, on the following day, he awoke from a quiet sleep, and, after writing a few lines, once more desired them to send for Deb, they knew it was no incoherent wanderings which prompted him to ask for her. But, for the first time for months, the crossing had not been swept—the child with the large eyes and the tatterdemalion bonnet was not there. She had gone, as others had done before her, to climb the ladder of life; and even while Harry Durant was clamouring for her she was already standing on the first rung.

CHAPTER III.

RIVEN LIVES.

‘AGIR est aisé, *attendre* est ce qu’il y a de plus difficile au monde.’ This axiom of George Sand was what Cicely was feeling acutely in practice, though of the mere theory she knew nothing. Not a word, a line, or a sign from Harry Durant through all these long days and longer weeks had reached her, and this from the best of reasons—that Mrs. Fitzalan had carefully suppressed all intelligence of the absentee, somewhat frequently though he had vouchsafed it in the early part of his absence. It was, in fact, the want of replies, or at least of

satisfactory replies, which had irritated him against Mrs. Fitzalan, and made him feel that some stronger coercion was necessary to keep her still amenable to his wishes and his authority. The news about his accident had been sent to Paris in due course, but this Mrs. Fitzalan had, as she would have said, kept from Cicely 'out of tender regard for her feelings.' Nothing but little innuendoes about Rose had reached the girl; and stung to the quick by the inward knowledge that she had wasted a single thought on Harry Durant, she called all her self-respect into play, and, in seeking to forget his very existence, accepted, more or less, the increasing attentions which Sir Hubert Fleming so assiduously heaped upon her. Ever since the night at the Opera he had hovered about her path like a shadow, saying but little, pressing his suit not at all,

but always there—almost oppressive in silent offices of courtesy. Sometimes Cicely would shiver as she looked up suddenly and saw this man's eyes as usual gazing on her.

‘My fate—alas! my fate!’ she would murmur, as she turned about in her mind to find if possible some mode of escape. Now she is standing by an open window, though the day is cold, but her head is throbbing and feverish, and not even the chilling winds of early spring will cool the hot aching of her brow. A letter is in her hand—she has read it and re-read it so many times that she almost knows it by heart; yet once again she peruses it as carefully as she did at the very first. It is from Sir Hubert Fleming, who urges his love very strongly, and pleads for an answer in the name of his long, patient waiting—‘but, much though he loves her, begs that it may be a negative one, unless in

her heart she feels she can be faithful to the end.'

Mrs. Fitzalan has entered the room quietly while she is still studying Sir Hubert's missive.

'Does a girl's first love-letter, and from such a suitor, require so much consideration?' asks the widow, smiling. 'I am surprised, Cis; I imagined you would have answered it by this time.'

"Faithful to the end," Mrs. Fitzalan. What does he mean by that? If I do marry Sir Hubert, do you think I should be unfaithful to him?'

'Good gracious, what nonsense! No, of course not; but Sir Hubert is rather specious in his way of putting an argument. Take it all for what it is worth—a few mere words.'

'Perhaps I had better take the whole

letter for a few mere words,' said Cicely, quietly. 'I honour and respect Sir Hubert, and am rather sorry for him—he looks so melancholy at times—but, Mrs. Fitzalan, I do not love him.'

'Never mind, dear ; pity is akin to love. Try to condole with his melancholy, and you will get on all right. Recollect Sir Hubert is a brilliant *parti*, such as a girl like you could scarcely have hoped to make.'

'But I do not love him,' repeated Cicely, meditatively, as though talking to herself.

'Cicely, don't be a fool, or you will make me seriously angry. A chit like you should know nothing of love. It would be both indelicate and indecorous if you did love him. Marry him and behave yourself: the love will come after.'

'But suppose it comes for some one else?' pleaded the girl.

‘That is impossible when you are once married.’

‘Is it? I did not know marriage was such a safeguard. Did you love Mr. Fitzalan when you married him, I wonder?’

The widow grew scarlet—then pale.

‘You should not ask home questions,’ she said. ‘It is not always convenient to be reminded of the past.’

‘If I thought marriage would be a safeguard against every thought that would ever come, I would accept Sir Hubert,’ murmured Cicely, softly.

Mrs. Fitzalan smiled.

‘Don’t laugh at me, please. You know what I mean. Do you think the recollection of the vow I had taken would never leave me, but keep me always faithfully in the right road?’

‘To a young woman possessed of your

remarkable sensitiveness I should think it would. At all events, I would give it a trial if I were you.' And, anxious though Mrs. Fitzalan was that this match should come about, yet she could not wholly hide a certain satirical tone in her voice as she answered Cicely's well-meant scruples. It jarred on Cicely unpleasantly.

'If you please, Mrs. Fitzalan, I would rather not marry Sir Hubert,' she said, promptly.

'Then you will go back before this day month to Swinton Vicarage, and be seen in the circles of fashionable life no more,' was the as prompt rejoinder.

'Why? Are you tired of me already?'

'It does not suit me to keep you here any longer, and it does suit me that you should marry Sir Hubert.'

Cicely gave a deep sigh.

‘No one cares for me,’ she said, piteously. ‘I wonder why grand-dad was taken away?’

‘In order that you might marry Sir Hubert, I should imagine.’ And the sneer came back to the lady’s voice.

‘Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how unkind you are! In the whole wide world there is no one to be kind to poor me.’ And she laid her head on the table and began to sob convulsively.

‘Really, Cicely, you are too absurd. A man offers you the devotion of his life, and you sit whimpering such nonsense as that.’

‘If I could only love him——’

‘You aggravate me beyond all mortal endurance. I shall leave you awhile to your reflections—see that they bring you to a speedy acceptance of Sir Hubert, and thank God for giving you so good and honourable a husband.’ And for some time

after Mrs. Fitzalan took her departure Cicely sat and cried.

‘What should she do, what could she do? If Mr. Durant were only there to advise her! If he said “Marry Sir Hubert,” she would accept the sacrifice at once. If he said “Marry Sir Hubert,”’ she repeated, and then she grew scarlet and wept afresh at the train of thought her own words had suggested. ‘To be alone for ever in the world would be very miserable, and no one seemed to care much what became of her—even Mrs. Fitzalan talked about turning her out’—was the next reflection, when her tears had nearly spent themselves. ‘She would try to be a good and dutiful, if not a loving wife to this man who offered her so much; and as for happiness, perhaps it would come in time.’

So after another half-hour spent in more

thinking and fresh tears Cicely wrote her simple letter :—

‘ Dear Sir Hubert,—I will do my best to be faithful and true—if you will help me and tell me what is right.

‘ CICELY.’

It was a strange acceptance, and to most men would have been somewhat unsatisfactory ; but Sir Hubert, remembering the difference in their years, and regarding only the honesty of purpose of the girl he was going to take to his hearth, found no fault in the scant professions. Once in years gone by, when they had been lavished profusely, they had ended in deception ; with fewer promises he thought perhaps the chances of a life of happiness might be greater. He little knew at what cost those few lines had been penned, or perchance the preliminaries

of the marriage might never have been arranged. Long before this final letter Mrs. Fitzalan had circulated the report that they were engaged; hence the rumours which, reaching England, had ended in Harry Durant's broken leg. Now her best endeavours were to be used that the ceremony should be completed before his recovery would allow him to appear on the scene.

Thus, with undue haste and few preparations, it came about that Cicely married Sir Hubert. On a cold, wet morning, in the early spring, the nuptial service was performed, with nothing in the weather or out-of-door surroundings to cheer the heart of the young bride, who, all the time that she was being dressed in her trailing silk and adorned with the ornaments which were the bridegroom's presents, was wishing herself back again in the Swinton woods—back in

those happy days of early childhood, before contact with the world had marred her first outburst of young joy, or men had come with professions of love to overshadow the sunshine on her path. Yet she was only seventeen—but what so experience-bringing, so ageing as a heart-history?

She looked pale as the stars at evening, while her eyes shone like orbs of fire, as they bore her to the altar, Mrs. Fitzalan, in the freshest of toilettes, keeping ever close to her side, and seeking to reassure her in the softest, most blandishing of tones. At last it is all over, and with faltering steps, just touching shyly Sir Hubert's arm with the tips of her fingers, Cicely leaves Mrs. Fitzalan's house to go, in a little well-appointed brougham, to the station. For a moment on the threshold of the outer door she raises her eyes. A tiny crowd has assembled to

witness the departure of the *jeune mariée*. Foremost amongst them, leaning on two sticks, is Harry Durant. An ashen hue, such as her face has never worn before, passes over Cicely's features—she clutches now Sir Hubert's arm for support. He looks at her aghast.

‘My darling, are you ill? Has all this been too much for you?’

‘Yes, yes ; let us go quickly.’

He almost lifts her into the carriage, and the door is shut. They start at full speed on the matrimonial journey, so inauspiciously commenced for both.

It was true, then. Mr. Durant paused for a few seconds to recover breath as he watched the carriage dash speedily out of sight ; and then, with an imprecation such as few men utter with all their heart twice in a lifetime, he turned into the house, limping slowly by

the aid of his sticks up the staircase to Mrs. Fitzalan's residence *au premier*. All the guests have not departed, and Harry Durant's fierce and turbulent face is scarcely in keeping with the festive scene as he appears like a war-god amongst them. That something has gone wrong everyone seems to know by intuition—only on Mrs. Fitzalan's face there are no clouds. Serene in her calm, well-developed beauty she sails across to speak to him—'hopes he has quite recovered from his accident—wishes he had arrived before—he ought to have given the bride away—they would have put the wedding off had they known he was so nearly well,' &c., &c.

To all these meaningless remarks Harry listened as a man in a dream.

'Does Cicely love this man?' at last he asked. 'If not, by what right have you given her to him?'

‘Does she love him, Mr. Durant! What young girl does not love riches and a position? It is not every village lass who gets the chance of becoming “my lady.” Only six months out of the lodge, too!’

‘The less said on that subject the better,’ thundered Mr. Durant, ‘or I may have a few remarks to make which may not be wholly palatable.’

‘Harry!’ And Mrs. Fitzalan’s voice lost its petulancy, her face its calm, as she looked at him with pleading eyes and spoke in a piteous tone.

‘Harry, will you not wait till all this world has gone before we have an explanation?’

‘For your sake let us trust it will be a straightforward one,’ he said, as, dropping into a chair, he assented to her wishes; caring more, perhaps, to avoid a public

scandal for his own sake than for hers. This unexpected advent had fallen somewhat as an ill omen on the wedding party; and, without knowing exactly why, the guests seemed to feel that something of disagreeable import had occurred; and each forming his or her conjectures as to what had happened, they speedily withdrew, leaving the two combatants to fight their private battle alone, with such weapons as they each knew best how to wield. The manly attack was fierce and to the purpose, the woman's defence evasive and feline—for no one knew better when to lie crouched and when to spring than did Mrs. Fitzalan.

‘She had done all for the best—how could she know?—no letter of disapproval or reproach had ever reached her—the French postal system was so defective. Nothing but rumours about his intended marriage with

Miss Bertrand. She quite thought, when he placed Cicely with her, the promise was she was to do the best she could for her in life according to the light given her; and what could be better than a marriage with Sir Hubert? Of course she thought Mr. Durant's interest in the girl was purely from charity; how could she know that it was a deeper one?' Here was her little spring as she looked at him from under her half-closed lids.

'Who said I had a deeper interest?' he asked. 'I gave Cicely in charge to you, and to me alone you were responsible for her happiness, You had no right to marry her without my consent.'

'It is done now,' she replied, soberly. 'I am sorry you are not pleased, but Cicely's happiness was my first consideration. You little know, Mr. Durant, how I have learnt to love her.'

‘Pah! Look here, Margaret Denham: let there be no disguises between you and me.’

‘Not that name, for God’s sake—not that name!’

‘Ha, ha!’—and he laughed fiercely—‘I thought that would make you quail. You have played me false—traitorously false—you have married the girl I had selected for my own wife to a man for whom I do not believe she cares a straw. What bitterer wrong do you think you could inflict? And you expect that in submission to your wishes I shall let you flourish!’

‘It is only a retort for an old grievance,’ she replied, with all the passion latent in her nature expressed in her voice. ‘I have not forgotten the past, if you have, Harry Durant. Besides, you cannot injure me—you have no proof.’

For answer he took a paper from his pocket and unfolded it before her, guarding it well, lest she should snatch it from him.

‘Miss Wilson! It is all a lie. She has been dead these three years.’

‘Strange that I saw her only six-and-thirty hours ago, and stood by her as she gave me that paper—wrote those lines!’

Utterly discomfited, Mrs. Fitzalan cowered in abject terror at his feet.

‘Spare me,’ she said. ‘How could I know your feelings? I did the best for Cicely—by heaven I did—even to signing a deed settling everything on her at my death.’

‘Which paper, as you know, is not worth its stamp. Have you told Fleming the whole truth?’

‘Not a word—he did not ask it.’

‘Then that tale remains for me. I will not intrude on the happiness of their honey-

moon,' he added, bitterly, ' but afterwards he shall know everything.'

' Oh, Harry, you will not be so wicked—you will not mar her life and his by interference now ? '

' Mar her life and his ! Then it is true : the girl did prefer me to him ? '

' It cannot matter now. She thought you were going to marry Rose Bertrand.'

' And who told her so but you—false devil that you are ? '

Mrs. Fitzalan started to her feet.

' How dare you, sir, use such words as those to me ? How have I ever injured you ? Nay, in the past would I not have laid down my life to save one hair of yours from injury ? Because I committed an indiscretion which you in your pride thought fit never to forgive, is that any reason why I am to be followed up and tortured as you

list? For years we never met—why did you cross my path again, armed too with the knowledge of all the delinquencies of my life, and ready to proclaim them to the world if I failed to obey your whims? It was both mean and cowardly. Do your worst; I defy you. Give Cicely her due. I have no grudge against her—save that she stood in my path, I would not have harmed her. But I thank God that I have wounded you and taught you that a woman has power to strike, even when she has fallen as low as, in your proud estimation, I have.'

Like a wrathful Camilla she stood erect, uttering her words with a quick force which made him almost breathless; then she swept out of the room and ended an interview which she herself had brought to a climax.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ART SCHOOL.

THE old German sits placidly by the fire, smoking his pipe, with a score on his knee. Every now and then he looks with a pleased expression round the room, in which some seven or eight young people are amusing themselves during an evening hour of recreation. He starts up, however, as the door opens and a comely-looking woman, some eight-and-thirty years of age, comes in, followed by Deb, the sweeper. Deb looks pale and frightened and shy as she shrinks behind honest Gretchen—old Wurzel's thrifty, housewifely daughter. Very little of

the street-girl is apparent about Deb, except her rags, as she stands there, with downcast eyes, holding very tight to the friendly hand with which Gretchen has bestowed on her a kindly pressure.

‘The new pupil!’ cry the ‘kinder,’ as old Wurzel calls them, in chorus, and Deb is at once surrounded by fresh young faces—none of which, however, eclipse her own in loveliness—as, shy and silent, she stands there looking wonderingly at them out of her marvellous eyes. Charity and loving kindness are the passwords of the old German’s religious creed; so every one in that little group has a word of welcome for the stranger. Were they not all foundlings the master had brought home to nurture and to teach, and had they not all passed through the same ordeal from lonely fright that she is doing now?

‘Sing, kinder, sing,’ says the master, while he himself strikes a few notes on an instrument which stands close by.

In a moment the room resounds with the soft, sweet voices of the youthful choir raised in unison ; and Deb, as though transfixed, listens breathlessly, while the tears course each other as though unbidden down her cheeks.

‘The power of the beautiful it is awakened in her soul!’ cries the old man, enthusiastically, as the children finish their melody. ‘Will you too join in making song, my daughter?’

But Deb shook her head.

‘Let me go,’ she whispered, softly ; ‘this is no place for me—it’s a deal too grand.’

‘No, no, little sister, you must bide with us now you have come,’ said a chorus of young voices. ‘The master will teach you as

he has taught us, and you won't be frightened long.'

'But my rags,' pleaded Deb, 'they make me that ashamed—but I can't better them, for pence is rare.'

'You shall have one of my frocks—Miss Gretchen gave me two,' suggested a girl about sixteen, who, though nearly the same age, was much bigger than fragile Deb.

'She shall have a tidy one of her own if she is a good girl and likely to deserve it,' interrupted Gretchen. 'You have no need to mind your rags here, Deb. We have all worn them some time—I had neither shoes nor stockings when I was a little one in Germany.'

The daintiness of Deb's nature, latent though it was, kept in subjection by privation and a want of knowledge of better things, was yet sufficiently alive to kindle at the

thought of clean neat clothing—she who had always loathed herself for the rags circumstances had forced her to wear.

Her rising spirits received, however, a momentary check from the master's reminding words—

‘For one whole week, child, you have promised your broom to keep—is it not so?’

‘Ah, I forgot, sir.’

‘Forgot so soon! He had right, then, the gentleman who passed us. Once take the child away—she can go back no more. Alter Wurzel, you have been a fool, as ever—carried away by a vain chimera.’

‘I hope not, father. Why should this child fall short of your expectations? Others have turned out well.’ And Gretchen laid her hand on his shoulder as she spoke.

‘Look at her face, mein Gretchen—read well into her eyes, and answer for yourself

the question ; then hear the soft notes of her voice, and think to yourself as you dwell upon the future.'

'I see no evil lines, and for the rest we must trust in God. She will be subject to less temptation here than sweeping in the street.'

'You will take her, then, with the others—you have already the child in liking.'

'Yes, father.'

Then, turning to Deb—for these few sentences had been whispered apart—

'Would you like to stay with us, child?'


'Oh, do not send me away, lady ; please don't send me away. I will be so good, and try to do as you bid me.'

And from that day forward at Deb's crossing other hands than hers manipulated the broom ; and not a few of those who had given her pence wondered, when they saw a

stranger, whether it was for good or evil that the little sweeper had departed. If they had seen her as she stood by the master's side, singing with the voice of a seraph the wonderful exercises by which he trained her, would they not once more have asked the question, 'Is it for good or evil that this thing has happened unto her?'

The rags have all disappeared, and Deb, in a light blue gingham, plainly made after Gretchen's homely pattern, would scarcely be recognised by her old friends. Her fair, luxuriant, curly hair is turned off her face and rolled in a coil at the back of her head; and the large violet eyes are but seldom now cast sadly down. She is the happiest in that happy throng; and as the days and weeks roll on, neither old Wurzel nor his daughter have had cause to regret the hour when they took Deb the sweeper from her

crossing and her broom, and promoted her to a place in the Art School, as the old man loved to call the tiny house where he and his pupils dwelt. This school was old Wurzel's especial hobby. Like most geniuses, he was somewhat of a visionary; and though practical enough in intent, it would probably have failed entirely had it not been for Gretchen's care and forethought. Too poor to have carried on such a work without assistance, they were in the habit of receiving funds from wealthier art-lovers than themselves, and the arranging, expending, and accounting for these funds devolved entirely on Gretchen, who, though Anglicised by long residence in London, yet retained all the thrifty ideas of her own land, and had moreover received from her mother an early training in domestic and housewifely duties. She devoted herself to the children with



maternal care ; and when the hours of school were ended she would teach them by turns to cook and clean and sew with a precision and patience which were truly characteristic of her Fatherland. To blend usefulness with art-knowledge was the theory which honest Gretchen was perpetually striving to put into practice ; and the fact of Deb not being able to read or write pained the good Gretchen not a little, especially as the hours devoted to learning were the most bitter in the girl's life ; but ' Not read and be an *artiste*—impossible—you must back to your broom, child,' said somewhat sternly by old Wurzel, would arouse her slumbering energies, and for a few days the tasks would be less irksome.

Go back ! No, that she never could do now. But whither in the future lay her way ?

Once or twice, when she had been out with one of the other pupils—for Gretchen never allowed any of the children to be in the streets alone if she could help it—she had passed the old crossing and stood and looked at the one-legged man who had succeeded her as sweeper; and no one who had known her in those days could have imagined that Deb in her clean, tidy clothes, was the little ragged lass who used to solicit pence from the passers-by. It was a favourite walk of Deb's to go to the well-remembered corner, and Gretchen did not object. To keep the past well in mind was a wholesome lesson, she conjectured; so Deb and Minna Hoffmann, a tall, pleasant-spoken German girl, who had taken to little Deb, wandered by there at least twice in the week. For six weeks now Deb had been at the school. The work of civilisation was going on briskly, while

old Wurzel proclaimed her voice to be the finest in the house ; nay, almost spoiled the girl and made her companions jealous by his flattering remarks. But Deb was very shy of having any belief in herself. She loved music for music's sake ; it had not entered her mind—at all events, not yet—what effect those wondrous strains she could evoke at will would one day have on that great world of which the little street-girl understood but few of the intricacies.

‘She was to sing—sing for ever—on earth—in heaven’—Wurzel had said ; and, like a bird who delights in the carolling of its own sweet voice, she sang and asked no questions about the future.

‘Lor’ bless yer, no one ever loved me—no one belonging to me, like, I mean—never since I was ever so little. I was six—or something like it—when mother died ; and

she used to whack me fine—I mind that,’ Deb was saying, as she walked along the street with her pet companion.

‘ Oh, Deb, how sad ! I wish you had known my mother. The angels took her just three years ago, and Miss Gretchen fetched me away to the school-home. Mother was so sweet and good ! How sad not to have had a beautiful, good, kind mother like mine ! ’

‘ Well, Minna, you tell me all about her, and it will help make up the want. Go on ; it does a lone child good to hear. I never heard anything about love and charity, and all they kind of things, till I came to the school, you know. Fancy me at school !—wouldn’t some of the old ’uns laugh if they know’d it ! ’

‘ Did you never say prayers at night, Deb, when you were little, and ask for kind-

ness and love? I used to kneel by mother's knee; and when she was too ill to sit up I knelt by her bedside.'

'And what did you pray for, Minna?'

'Well, for health, strength to do right, and love to help me along.'

'I should like to have all that—teach me to pray too.'

'If mother were only here!' murmured the elder girl. 'But she told me I must learn to do without her, and I will do my best.'

Thus almost intuitively was the humanising process going on in Deb, and loving hearts were striving to eradicate the proclivities contracted in gutters and alleys. The seed, too, was not being cast in bad soil, for Deb's evil propensities scarcely amounted to vices; though no one save those who have themselves worked among

girls born and brought up among such surroundings as hers had been can fully recognise how utterly impossible it is ever wholly to cancel every clinging remembrance of early youth. Poor though all Herr Wurzel's pupils were, yet Deb's origin was the meanest ; and had it not been for her wonder-striking voice it is scarcely likely she would have been selected as an inmate of the school-home.

‘To-night we will make a first prayer, or you shall learn my first one,’ Minna had said, after a pause ; but already Deb had forgotten the subject, and, with a little cry, rushed across the road.

‘My stars ! there you are, sir. And how ill you do look, to be sure !’

The gentleman who was thus addressed eyed her curiously for some moments, as though bewildered by an unexpected and

unknown apparition ; then suddenly recollecting himself, 'Deb !' he said. 'Why, I scarcely knew you. You have grown neat and trim. What has become of the broom ?'

'Throw'd it right away, sir, and I've took to my voice instead.'

'Wurzel has got his way, then. I suppose you are staying at the school ?'

'Yes, sir, and me and Minna are out for a walk. Minna, this is Mr. Durant—him as always gave me silver instead of coppers.'

'The last half-crown I gave you you left behind,' he said, laughing.

'Didn't want to be paid out of my line o' business, d'ye see, sir.'

'And what is your line of business now, Deb ?'

'Oh, I'se learnin'. But don't I live well

jest! And don't Miss Gretchen give me decent clothes—boots and all, without a hole!’

‘Ah!’ he said sententiously. The one word ‘*Après*,’ was muttered below his breath, as though asking the question of himself.

‘And this other young lady here, what does she do?’ he enquired, after a moment.

‘Oh, Minna just sings like the rest. She goes to Germany soon, for church choir. Shan't I be sorry to part with her!’

‘And are you not going to Germany, Deb?’

‘Law bless you, sir, what for? I ain't German—never could twist the words out. Besides, it's ever so far away.’

‘And you have so many relations to leave, little Deb.’

‘It ain't that, sir, but I'd get home-sick, I know I should. Fancy being all alone in furrin parts!’

‘You will have to go though, if you mean to be a singer.’

‘Shall I?’—and the first drop of bitterness fell in Deb’s cup of bliss—‘shall I? Then I almost wish I’d stuck to the broom.’ She, however, instantly pulled herself together. ‘No, I don’t, for then I never should have been nothink.’

‘And you hope to be something now? Brava, little Deb—go on and prosper. Tell Wurzel I shall come and look you all up at the school some day soon.’

‘Oh, won’t that be nice!’ cried Deb, clapping her hands. ‘But bless you, sir, you walk quite limping like—what is it?’

‘I broke my leg, Deb, the very day I saw you last.’

‘Law! and I never know’d it!’

‘I sent for you to take a message for me, but you had left the crossing.’

‘Dear heart ! I *am* sorry. If one could only know what other folks wanted and was a-going to do, how different it would be !’

‘All the excitement of chance would be taken out of life,’ he said, bitterly ; ‘and to disappointed lives there is nothing but excitement left.’

But she did not wholly understand, so she only looked at him. She was longing to ask about Miss Wilson ; but Minna was there, and he had forbidden her to speak to anyone of that little episode ; so she went back to the broken limb and asked how it had happened, receiving a succinct account, the causes and hidden feelings which would have made that account a full one being, however, reserved.

So Deb and Harry Durant met again ; and, full of the great gentleman who always gave her silver, she went back to the Art School to talk of him to the other pupils as

though he were some fairy prince who had come from his enchanted castle expressly to be worshipped.

For some days did this sort of ideal talk go on, till, in the preparation for a great gathering of all the patrons of the school, he was for awhile forgotten. Once every half-year did these meetings take place, in order to test from time to time the progress made by old Wurzel's pupils. Prizes were given by the ladies and gentlemen who formed the committee; and, in accordance with foreign custom, wreaths of laurel decked the head of the *prima donna*.

It was Deb's first essay, and she was worked up to a high state of nervous excitement for many previous days. Nature, not art, was chiefly what she had to trust to, for there had as yet been scarcely any time for training; but Wurzel had bestowed of his

best talents on the child whose magical voice had so attracted him.

The evening came at last ; and, dressed all alike in plain blue serge frocks of Gretchen's design, the children were assembled in the music-room awaiting the arrival of the guests. Deb was pale as death—almost as shy and tremulous as on the night when she cast aside her broom for ever.

She had never been in a room with 'big swells' before—only seen them roll by in their carriages—and 'they made her that frightened,' she said.

At last the first guests arrive and take their seats at the end of the room prepared for them. Deb watches them all with curious interest.

A grave-looking gentleman and a young girl with flashing eyes—she supposes his

daughter—especially awaken her notice ; and a whispered remark from Minna, ‘That is Sir Hubert and Lady Fleming ; she is a bride,’ makes her look at them again and again in speechless wonder.

When some twenty people have arrived the concert begins ; and, to the glowing satisfaction of old Wurzel, and amid the rapturous applause of the audience, the children sing.

Then come some instrumental and vocal solos of unequal merit, and at last it is Deb’s turn. Tremblingly the first notes come out—how could she be otherwise than nervous ?—But gradually the power of the music, the novelty of the situation, inspire the girl as she has never been inspired before, and she throws all her soul into her voice. She is encored again and again, and awarded, without a dissentient word, the crown of

laurel. It is Cicely's hand that places it on her brow as she asks the name of the flushed and gratified singer.

'Please, mem—that is, my lady—I am Deb. I swept a crossing till the master took me up.'

'Which showed great discrimination on his part,' struck in Sir Hubert. 'You must come and sing to Lady Fleming. Will you not ask her, Cis?'

'With all my heart,' cried Cicely, warmly. 'We will be great friends. We neither of us have any relations, I imagine.'

'Cis, you are Lady Fleming now,' whispered Sir Hubert.

'Ah, yes; but I may befriend Deb, may I not?'

'Certainly, certainly, dear; do whatever pleases you—only keep your position.'

Cicely gave her shoulders a little shrug, as though 'the position' palled already.

'I will ask Herr Wurzel to let you come and spend a long day. You shall sing, and I will listen. Deb knows more than I do, Sir Hubert,' she went on, looking mischievously at her husband. 'No one in Swinton village ever taught me music.'

But the love of mischief—the pleasure at having found this little singer to patronise and make a playfellow of—faded away on the instant. In the doorway stood Harry Durant. Unperceived, as he hoped, he had heard Deb's singing, and witnessed her subsequent reception by Lady Fleming. Strange are the vicissitudes of life. Accidentally, under the quaint old German's roof, were these two destined to meet again, though an immeasurable gulf lay between them.

Cicely repressed the little cry which rose even to her throat. Had she not been reminded but now that she was Lady Fleming? But her husband noted the change of countenance.

‘What is it, Cis, my darling?’

‘Nothing; only there is Mr. Durant in the doorway. Ask him to come and speak to me.’

He came at her bidding—‘hoped Lady Fleming was quite well—had not that child a marvellous voice? and such eyes!—was glad Lady Fleming had taken to her—she was a *protégée* of his too. Would be delighted to call when he came back to town—he was leaving for a few days. The room was very hot—he must seek the outer air—he had not been quite well since his accident—must have a thorough change soon.’

Yes, it was all changed; and with an icy

coldness about her heart, a gasping, tearless, tightness in her throat, Cicely stood there as though spellbound, till Sir Hubert led her to the carriage ; while Deb, radiant with joy over the evening's successes, envied the pretty lady who seemed to be such good friends with Mr. Durant !

CHAPTER V.

IN THE HOME CIRCLE.

A VILLA at Campden Hill, furnished elegantly, though perhaps somewhat rigidly ; servants to command ; well-appointed carriages ; a devoted husband—what could Cicely crave for more in life ? Yet, as she stands in her fresh white dress, playing with the blind-tassel, while the sun's rays linger among her soft tresses, there is a shade upon her brow which the girlish life should not yet have known.

‘I have promised to be honest and true, and I will keep my word,’ the young heart is murmuring to itself. ‘Yet I wish I had

never left Swinton. I wonder if Sir Hubert would take me back there? Mr. Burke might help me to be good. Ah, no, I should not dare to tell him—I must not tell anyone that dreadful secret—only Mrs. Fitzalan knew or guessed, and she said it was all nonsense. I wish it were. Shall I ever think it all nonsense, I wonder? And he looked so ill and changed!’ Then she leant against the side of the open window and thought over her faded day-dream as she looked into the pretty garden, gay with the early spring flowers.

‘Would your ladyship please to give some instructions about these flower-beds? Sir Hubert said I was to ask you.’ The gardener’s rough tones broke the spell. Brushing hastily away the mist which had risen to her eyes as she leant there, Cicely walked down some steps into the garden

and tried to fill her place as Lady Fleming. What did this simple village maid know of laying out flower-beds and planting gardens? And she would have laughed heartily over her ignorance and her mistakes under other auspices. But it was all wrong somehow; and with a sort of timid gravity she ventured on a few little suggestions, simply because she did not wish to offend the gardener, caring, however, but little the while whether the flower-beds existed or no. Sir Hubert had gone into town, and Cicely had reckoned on a quiet day all to herself; and now this tiresome gardener had come to impose duties and interests on her from which she would so gladly have escaped.

The close room at the Art School on the previous evening had made her head ache, she told Sir Hubert, as an excuse for her

depression and disinclination to accompany him into London ; but she was not allowed to forget that she was Lady Fleming, although she was alone for a few hours. No, she could never again be Cicely the village girl.


She racked her brain to remember how the gardens were arranged at Swinton Hall, and spoke so diffidently and prettily to the great gardener, as she thought him, that he told the servants afterwards that Sir Hubert's wife was the sweetest lady he had ever seen. 'But, lor,' bless ye, she have caught the master's gloom.'

In years gone by, when Hubert Fleming had wooed and won another and scarcely less fair a bride, he had but little understood the tactics by which a young heart may be kept fresh, joyous, and loyal. Did he comprehend the matter any better now that his

hair was besprinkled with grey—his own heart scared by disappointment and fret? Scarcely. Luxury, refinement, state, Cicely had in abundance—love, too, as Sir Hubert knew how to lavish it in undemonstrative attentions. Still the void was not filled; and as far as he was concerned duty, with its cold, calculating preciseness, must ever take the place of heartiness and spontaneous affection. As the gardener had defined it, the whole household seemed impressed by ‘the master’s gloom.’

The subject of the flower-beds being at last finally despatched, Cicely wanders off through the miniature grounds into a tiny shrubbery which had been planted at the back of the house. There she sits for awhile and resumes her dream. A listlessness and languor seem to have crept over her since last night, for which she would not dare

to account ; but she does not ask herself the reason—only sits on there and gives way to the painful pleasure of dwelling on the theme the wicked fairies who are at that moment presiding over her destiny suggest to her. There seems no beginning and no end to the story Cicely is spinning out of her imagination, and of which she herself is the heroine, although she scarcely wishes to recognise the fact. It has no strong passions to define its outlines, but is merely a girlish romance over what might have been, and a kind of poetical longing that life may glide away noiselessly like some liquid stream, and that unobserved and calmly she may dwell on there, undisturbed by storm and tempest, till rest comes. She does not want joys or society or finery—only to be kind to Sir Hubert and affectionate



to him after her own fashion ; and this she will carry out so much more readily if left peacefully in her pretty villa. Paris and Mrs. Fitzalan, of all places and people, she hopes never to see again.

‘Cis, dearest, it is too early in the year to be sitting out of doors without a hat.’

Sir Hubert had come back, and as one guilty Cicely sprang up to meet him. He took her hand—it was as cold as ice.

‘See, I have brought an old friend to dine with us.’ And perhaps the first flush of real pleasure she had felt that day came over her as she saw Algy Duncombe’s boyish face and welcomed him cordially to her new home.

‘I don’t know what sort of fare our little *châtelaine* has provided,’ said Sir Hubert, striving to be gay, as he frequently

did now. 'They are early days to test her housewifely powers.'

'Oh, Mr. Duncombe is nobody; he will have to take what he can get and be thankful,' she answered, casting off her past depression, with a laugh.

'Thank you, Lady Fleming. Let me always be nobody—there is scarcely a pleasanter position to fill in the house of people one likes.'

'That is right, Cis. I always calculated on a brotherly and sisterly understanding between you and Algy.'

'I never had a brother—will you fill the vacant place?' she answered, with a little serio-comic air, making a mock curtsy to him.

'With all my heart—claiming all the privileges and all the duties.'

'Take care, take care, Algy, what you

are committing yourself to. The little lady there is somewhat *exigeante* in her requirements.'

'Oh, Sir Hubert!' cried Cicely; but Algy interrupted her.

'I have no fear in pledging myself to perform all the brotherly functions Lady Fleming shall impose upon me, and only hope they may be onerous.'

'Oh, don't say that, Mr. Duncombe, because I cannot want you to be more than a playfellow, unless circumstances should render me very unhappy.'

'My darling!' whispered Sir Hubert, under his breath, as he pressed the little hand which during their walk to the house she had placed upon his arm.

'Playfellows! Hurrah! that is just the word,' shouted buoyant Algy, who, though dashed in his hopes of a speedy union with

May, yet never lost heart or turned sulky with fate. 'And, by way of beginning the play, Fleming and I have been concocting some fun as we drove down here. But I'll leave him to tell his own tale.'

'Well, Cis, dear, we have been arranging that you shall give a party. My little wife must not get moped ; she must have friends, and go about and amuse herself.'

Lady Fleming turned very white.

'It is very good of you, Sir Hubert ; but please I would much rather be quiet—I don't want to know a number of people. They will only frighten me. I am quite contented, thank you.'

She did not say happy—only contented. Both the men looked at each other in astonishment.

'But, Cis, dear, all girls like a little fun ;

and you are only a girl, though you are my wife.'

'All girls—yes, but I am not like other girls, I suppose. Besides, remember I was not brought up in your world. I am quite content to be alone with you and have Mr. Duncombe for a brother.'

'By Jove, can she love him after all?' was Algy's mental query. 'Poor little Cis! And I thought to do her a good turn by making a move towards getting her out of this moping existence. Well, I suppose it is a mistake to interfere between man and wife.'

But though Algy Duncombe had had some difficulty in persuading Sir Hubert that his wife ought to take her place in society, once having opened his eyes Cicely would find it no easy matter to close them again; in fact, the more determined she

seemed to be to escape from the trammels of society and the world the more resolute he was to impose them on her. Algy had suggested that she would die of suppressed youth, if she were kept boxed up with an old fellow like him and not taken about and amused ; and this thought once alive, Sir Hubert would not rest till he had done his duty by Cicely, or what he and Algy in their mannish wisdom regarded as duty.

‘Give a garden party here? Oh, Sir Hubert, I don’t know anyone, and there is no one to help me.’

‘Why, Lady Fleming, I saw piles of cards as I came through the drawing-room just now. To judge from your card-plate your acquaintance is scarcely a small one.’

‘Oh, they are all Sir Hubert’s friends, not mine.’ And the tears came into Cicely’s

eyes at the idea of receiving as hostess all these strange people.

‘Nonsense, Cis; my friends are your friends now. This objection is childish.’

Cis bit her lip and repressed her tears at this almost the first reproof she had received.

‘Is it my duty to entertain all these people?’ The question was addressed to Algy.

‘Catechism says it is your duty to fill your place “in that state of life into which it has pleased God to call you,”’ he answered, with his usual flippant levity.

‘Then send out the invitations, please, Sir Hubert, and I will do my best.’

But here arose a fresh difficulty—none of the trio were adepts in the art of party-giving. ‘Without some lady trained in the ways of fashionable life the whole thing

would be an utter *fiasco*,' Algy said ; ' wrong amalgamations would take place—divorced people be asked to meet each other ; the most horrible complications would arise ; in fact, Lady Fleming's first reception would be a thing to be remembered with horror.'

But, while he and Cicely laughed heartily at the supposititious failures and absurdities which he sketched with a light hand, Sir Hubert was pondering over what he considered the gravity of the situation. It appeared to him that having brought his young wife to London without providing her with any feminine guide to whom she could appeal for counsel and direction, was a gross neglect on his part, and he was thinking whom of his numerous acquaintance he would select for the purpose, while the two young people were amusing themselves over

the fun they managed to elicit from the ridiculous side of the picture.

‘Lady Susan Verulam!’ said Sir Hubert, speaking at last, after a long silence.

Algy gave a protracted whistle.

‘To what end do I hear the mention of that name?’ he asked, jauntily.

‘She will put us right about the invitations—she knows everybody.’

‘Just so—but does everybody know her?’

‘What do you mean, Algy? She is my first cousin.’

‘*À la bonne heure!* old fellow, and a very jolly party too. Few people one can spend a pleasanter half-hour with than with good-tempered Lady Sue.’

‘She is *the* very person; I will write to her to-night.’

‘So be it. Your cousin is, of course, the

right individual to introduce her ladyship here—only——’

‘Only what, Algy? None of your horrid, unbelieving tone—it is so demoralising. You have always got a *canard* about every woman. I am sure Lady Susan is most kind-hearted and excellent. I have known her since she was a child.’

‘The jolliest of the jolly, I repeat. Well, perhaps I have a nasty habit of knowing too much.’

‘And what do you know of Lady Susan? Out with it.’

Algy looked perplexed.

‘Upon my soul, I can’t exactly say—nothing specially—it does not do to repeat all one hears; as you say they may be only *canards*; but would not an older and staidier person be a better *chaperon*, if one may be permitted the word?’

‘Decidedly not. Cicely wants young people about her, not old ones. Besides, Lady Susan is nearly thirty. It is one of your prejudices, Algy. There are so few women you can tolerate, that little Cis ought to feel quite flattered at being an exception. While waiting for dinner I will just write a line to Lady Susan and ask her to drive over and lunch here to-morrow.’

Algy shrugged his shoulders as Sir Hubert walked away.

‘Obstinate as a mule. How odd it is that some people will not see!’

‘Tell me about Lady Susan. What is your objection to her?’ asked Cicely.

‘Oh, she is a noisy, jolly woman—very good company; all the men like her and the women hate her. Her own parties are amusing enough—a certain amount of Belgravia with a strong element of Bohemia,

to make them highly flavoured. Strange that Fleming don't see that it is not at all the thing to be wished for here.'

Cicely looked at him vacantly. Belgravia and Bohemia—the words were as Greek to her. She only said—

'If Sir Hubert wishes me to like Lady Susan, of course I must try to do so.'

'Oh, like her—you are sure enough to like her. She is immense fun.'

'Then why do you say women hate her?'

'Women of the world I mean,' said Algy, laughing. 'Women with whom she interferes, and who do not belong to her set—many of them are envious, because she is a favourite with the sterner sex.'

'Oh, Mr. Duncombe, I do not believe all this. As Sir Hubert says, you are too partial in your opinions.'

‘Not a bit of it. You have much to learn, my dear sister ; in fact, you will get lost in a labyrinth of knowledge ere long. Then you will be glad enough if I will help you through.’

‘What a miserable thing life is!’ said Cicely, drearily. ‘If Sir Hubert would only let me float through it without getting into the turmoil!’

‘Impossible—you have not begun to be jolly yet. You will enjoy the fun when once you get into the thick of it. How did you like the Art School last night? So like Fleming to drag you off there.’

‘Oh, I liked it so much. There was a girl with a marvellous voice—Deb they called her. She *was* a street-girl. She is coming down here to sing to me some day soon.’

‘Another of Fleming’s crotchets. Don’t let him fill the house with waifs and strays


who are supposed to have genius hidden somewhere under their hair—he will if you let him.’

‘I want this girl to come so much. She has such lovely eyes! And you know it is just a little bit dull here sometimes, Mr. Duncombe.’

‘Lady Susan Verulam and a street-girl—well, you are beginning your London acquaintance oddly enough, Lady Fleming. Where will it end?’ cried cheery Algy, laughing heartily at the amalgamations his mind’s eye saw in the future.

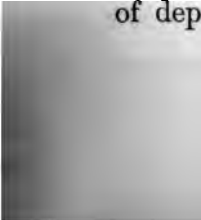
If he could really have raised the veil perhaps the picture which lay revealed might have sobered him.

As it was, he made merry over things as they appeared on the surface—accepted as a joke Lady Susan’s interference in the party-giving project; suggested several



people he thought should be invited, and went back to town radiant at the new relationship he had contracted, and still more at the hope that Lady Fleming would prove a reliable coadjutrix in helping him to baffle Mrs. Bertrand and gain more frequent interviews with May than he had hitherto obtained since he left Paris.

And as Cicely took out her pins and unfastened her hooks that night—for she was not yet fine lady enough to allow the maid to undress her—conflicting were the thoughts which chased each other rapidly through her brain. Girlhood was not so utterly dead within her but that she regarded favourably these glimpses into a cheery, pleasant land which had been opened out for her to-night. Yet an undefinable sense of depression hung over her and made her



dread—she scarcely knew what; but that her life could never be all fun and merri-ment she felt very sure, whatever Algy Duncombe might say to the contrary.

CHAPTER VI.

INTO THE WILDS.

‘“BABETTE, dépêche-toi, petite fille.” The *dame Anglaise* is waiting for her *déjeuner*. Twelve o’clock, and she has not touched food this blessed day. Poor lady! it would be something to know the history she has brought with her from other parts. Oh, *le monde, le monde*, how thankful we ought to be not to leave our village!’

‘Well for you, *Mère Françoise*, who saw Paris when you were young; but *nous autres*—we have seen nothing.’

‘Thank *le bon Dieu, Babette*. There is

nothing but wickedness in the world, *ma biche*.'

'*Tiens!* though. It is pleasant, this wickedness, sometimes. If the good lady would only take me back with her I would serve her *sans gages*.'

'*La Sainte Vierge* forbid. Never shall you go to that wicked Paris while the old *grand-mère* lives.'

'*Dites donc, Mère Françoise*, what *méchanceté* did you commit in Paris, that you are so afraid of it for me?' And Babette sat down at the old woman's feet.

'*Du tout, du tout*, Babette. Get up at once; the *dame Anglaise*, I tell you, is waiting for her breakfast.'

It is a small *auberge*, in an unfrequented village, in the beautiful country of the Limagne, where this conversation is going on, one midday in early spring. The snow

still tips the distant hills—mountains the aborigines style them—but the vegetation of the plains is opening into life, springing up on all sides with a fecundity and beauty unknown in most other parts of France. The dew-besprinkled grass and the early flowers, covered with diamonds from recent rain, are glistening in the rays of the sun ; while Mère Françoise's well-kept cows are basking in the expanding brightness. From amidst heavy clouds which hang over the mountains the sun has burst smiling forth, revealing numberless fantastic pictures which, formed by the mingling of snow and cloud, adorn the distant heights, giving a vastness and a grandeur to the landscape which is in striking contrast with the smiling luxuriance of the plains. Beautiful Auvergne ! poets have sung of its beauties ; painters have immortalised them on canvas ; yet the

theme is inexhaustible, so varied is the changing aspect of one of Nature's fairest gardens. In this Eden-land there is no conflicting social element to jar. It is as dissimilar to Paris and its ways as the *blasé* time-worn traveller could wish. Here, 'the world forgetting, of the world forgot,' he may linger in peace—if peace be in his heart—and, communing alone with Nature's God, acknowledge to the fullest the omnipotent hand which has formed beauty out of chaos.

The *dame Anglaise* who, fleeing from the haunts of men, has sought refuge amid these sylvan scenes is Mrs. Fitzalan.

Fierce passions had been roused within her by that last interview with Harry Durant. The past, that for years she had sought to live down, and had hoped would slumber tranquilly till the end came, had

been awakened ruthlessly. In flight only could she save herself—from what? Ah, that, perchance, she dared not answer; but she had left it all, and, with no enemy to face save the surgings of her own wild-beating heart, she had wandered forth, without even Victorine for a companion, into these wilds. To climb the mountains and spend hours in their vast solitudes had been her object; but the spring was not yet sufficiently advanced; she must wait till the snows had melted, the ordinary means of transit had begun. ‘Wait in that poor *auberge*, with no companions but Mère Françoise and Babette, and such a fund of old memories crowding about her brain: would human reason bear the test?’ But she would not return. She had thrown up her hand and left her partners in the game of life to play out the cards as best they

could. Let them be for a time at least ; later on it would be soon enough to inquire who had won or lost, for they were but shuffled as yet, these chance-cards which Mrs. Fitzalan had thrown on the baize so spitefully.

She has been out since early morning, wandering among the mist and damp. What cared she for weather? To forget the past was all she asked ; to kill the canker-worm within her only prayer. If storm and rain could effect that, then let them be welcome. At all events she must wander ever on, for rest was impossible. Yet whither, and to what end? Life could bring no hope. Poor Cicely ! Did she never think of the future she had carved for her out of a joyous, happy present ; did no remorse pursue her for the wrongs inflicted on that helpless, dependent child?

Hardened by disappointment, herself the victim, as she believed, of an adverse fate, what did Mrs. Fitzalan care for the troubles of others? As she walked rapidly through the stream-intersected country in which she had chosen to isolate herself, plunging recklessly into the tiny rivulets which abounded, and holding her dripping garments closely round her, what heeded she the amount of misery or happiness that existed? '*Ego*' was her only thought; revenge her only aim; but what could she do? She had fired the train; the gunpowder must blaze forth in time—and then!

Such was something of the mood in which she reached Mère Françoise's *auberge* and proceeded to change her wet skirts while the *omelette aux choux* was being cooked, and Babette was with dilatoriness collecting the plates and knives. Mrs. Fitz-

alan, the worshipped idol of Parisian flatterers! Could they but see her in this new life, shorn of external seemliness, picturing to herself reality as it stares before her in the grim shapes of failure and despair! Like a phantom from which there is no escape terror has driven her forth into these solitary wilds, and is ever about her, engrafted on her life-tree, a very portion of that *Ego* she so dearly loves. A madness and a dread had come over her, and she had fled from Paris, leaving no word, no sign, thus if she were calumniated and vilified she would not know it. Henceforth the mountains should be her home; she would make her portion with the honest peasants who dwelt there till—well, sooner or later she would learn the issue of events! She had taken sufficient money to last some months with economy; and for the future?

Death might ensue, or chance would come to the rescue. The very day of that last interview with Mr. Durant she had taken her unpremeditated departure; and when he returned on the morrow, to see if she would not reasonably discuss with him their relative positions, she was gone—escaped from his clutches for awhile. She had had her revenge, while he was baulked. But Harry Durant's spirit had been cowed, not roused by past events; long confinement to his bed had weakened him physically; disappointment and annoyance had crushed somewhat his mental power.

‘Let her go—remorse will bring its own punishment—to be alone with her thoughts will be a severer ordeal than any I could propose,’ had been his prompt decision, and he told the servants to make no alteration in their usual routine till their mistress re-

turned—as return he felt sure she would. He took no steps to interfere with her reception when that event should occur, and himself went off at once to England, to try, as many others have done before, whether he had a facile capability to forget. Had he known how Mrs. Fitzalan was wandering like Hagar in the wilds, the knowledge might have afforded him even in those sad hours a secret pleasure. He took up his paint-brushes and his easel, unpacked his picture-cases, and set up his studio as a rendezvous for *artistes* and *virtuosi*. Harry Durant had too much money really to want work, but he must play at being poor to kill time. He had travelled about the earth of late years till fresh scenes palled on him. No, he would try the settling down process for awhile—make London his home and, himself aloof, keep watch over Cicely.

He had scarcely anticipated meeting her so soon, as he carefully avoided the houses where Sir Hubert would be likely to introduce her. How could he imagine that, her honeymoon hardly waned, she would come out in the new character of an art-patron? He had forgotten or passed unheeded the fact that Sir Hubert's refined, scholarly, and artistic proclivities led him wherever talent and taste found a resting-place, and that to carry on the education Mr. Burke had so ably begun would be his chief interest now, and induce him to take Cicely wherever knowledge was to be gained or cultivation increased. This had been Sir Hubert's plan of life till Algy came and told him she would mope and die if she were shut up like a linnet in a gilded cage—she must have light and fun, like other young things. A husband who played the schoolmaster would

wake one fine morning to find himself regarded as 'a bore.'

All this and much more lecturing Sir Hubert had received from Algy on their way to Campden Hill on the day succeeding the school *soirée*. Perhaps Algy's wild talk would scarcely have hit the mark so readily but that Sir Hubert had noted the girl's haggard, jaded look, which he now with Algy's assistance gladly ascribed to the want of youth's natural amusements. How could they either of them know that Harry Durant had aught to do with Cicely's listlessness?

And he, as he sat in his chamber and smoked pipe after pipe far on into the small hours of morning, had he remarked her start when she saw him, the enforced quietness so unlike her usual manner as he talked with her? Ay had he, and a perfect hailstorm of maledictions fell from his lips on the wretched

woman who, alone in the Auvergne solitudes, was expiating in a sort of temporary madness some portion of her guilt.

‘Should he go away? He had told Cicely a change was necessary for his health’s sake, but he felt very disinclined to move; a sort of fascination seemed to keep him on in London. Why should he be hunted from pillar to post throughout the world, because forsooth she had chosen to become Lady Fleming? He had battled through a good many storms during a life tolerably fraught with adventure, and surmounted them—was he going to be crushed and made miserable now by a girl who had not sufficient love for him to remain free for his sake? No, he would assert his manliness, and let her see that it was a matter of the most perfect indifference to him whether she became Lady Fleming or not.’

So for a whole week he worked vigorously at his easel—only going to his club for dinner, and then playing at high stakes till the closing hour. Harry Durant, who seldom touched a card save to cut occasionally into a rubber when he was wanted, was, to the astonishment of his set, becoming all on a sudden one of the most determined whist-players in London.

‘What does it mean?’ asked one of his friends.

‘Mean, my dear fellow? Why, that I can’t take much exercise with a weak leg. I have been studying whist while I was shut up in those horrid lodgings. A man must do something.’

‘Yes, but a man does not play high by way of mere occupation.’

‘Occupation without excitement — no,

that I could not stand—time goes slow enough as it is.’

‘Ah, Durant, I am afraid you are in a bad way since that illness of yours.’

‘I shall get over it, old man, I make no doubt; only, you see, I must cure myself my own way. You gamble,—why should you object to my following in your wake?’

‘But then I always played. I am only expressing surprise at your sudden conversion to the green table; you used to prefer the society of women.’

Harry Durant laughed.

‘Have you not yet known me long enough or well enough to discover that I do everything in life by fits and starts? Cards have got their day just now—the women have had theirs.’

His companion shook his head, as though he thought it a bad business.

‘Come with me abroad—I am thinking of going off next week—I can’t stand London in the season.’

‘To play picquet in the *cercle* in Paris—where is the difference? No, thank you; I have had enough of the French capital to last for some time.’

‘Oh, we won’t go to Paris—but we might try Monaco. By the bye, did you ever fall in with a certain Mrs. Fitzalan in Paris?’

‘Rather,’ was the short reply.

‘Is she as handsome and all that sort of thing as people say?’

‘A good-looking devil—is that what you mean?’

‘Shown you the cloven foot, has she, eh, Durant? They say she has skedaddled. Who is the hero—do you know?’

‘I know nothing whatever of Mrs.

Fitzalan's concerns, nor do I wish to,' was the testy reply; and Mr. Durant turned away.

'Green tables *versus* womankind—here is the explanation,' muttered the other to himself as he marked the furrows on Harry's open brow; and, perfectly satisfied at his own reading of the riddle, would probably start it in half a dozen sources on the morrow as the latest club gossip. Like many others of his species, he merely skimmed the surface and was content. A letter given to Mr. Durant at that moment by Algy Duncombe, who had just come in, this searcher for information passed unobserved by, and yet it contained the essence of what he had been labouring for the last half-hour to find out. It merely announced that Lady Fleming would be at home on Tuesday, June 5. The invitation was stiff enough,

and would probably have found its way into the wastepaper-basket, had not 'Please come. —C. F.,' written in the corner, in a girlish hand heightened his pulse and fired the warm blood circling about his heart

CHAPTER VII.

A GARDEN PARTY.

A VICTORIA of the newest shape, with a pair of fast-going cobs, is dashing rapidly down the road in the direction of Campden Hill. Cicely's newly-appointed 'feminine director,' seated side by side with a fair man of the especial London club type, is laughing joyously, as though life for her knew no storms. On the surface of rippling streams Lady Susan Verulam continually floats in an atmosphere of perpetual sunshine. Fun and jollity are the only attributes she ever seeks among her surroundings. Flirtations amuse her—love would bore her; so

she never gets into any serious scrapes. Married at nineteen to a City millionaire, she enjoys to the fullest the good things the gods have sent her ; is civil to her husband when she sees him, which is not often ; nay, even flirts with him if they happen to indulge in an infrequent *tête-à-tête* ; while he, engrossed in his City life, his men's dinners, and his Sundays to look after things down at their place in B——shire, tells everyone he has the jolliest, most charming wife in England, and is perfectly happy. Toilettes and dangles Lady Susan has in abundance. But Mr. Verulam's purse-strings are elastic, thus the first are paid for without difficulty ; and as she was never known in her life to indulge in a *grande passion*, there is not much harm to be got out of the latter. This was the woman Sir Hubert, with his manly acumen, had chosen as a companion

for his wife. He only saw that she was merry and worldly-wise; while Cicely was moped and wanted to be taught the ways of London society. Opposites must be surely the extremes which would effect the *juste milieu* he desired to attain; and Lady Susan was nothing loth to patronise—it was the very thing which would give her *prestige*; so she folded the bride affectionately in her arms, promised her no end of assistance and amusement, entered *con amore* into the spirit of the garden party, took Cicely's breath away by her glib-tongued gossip, and stormed her heart by her overpowering protestations of devotion. It was like a fresh language to Cicely as she listened to her new cousin's never-ending list of *canards* and scandals about people Lady Fleming had never yet seen, but to whom she was to be introduced at her own party.

‘And you will have to recollect all the *historiettes*, my dear Cis, or you will make no end of mistakes. However, I shall be there to prompt you, so you will not come to much grief,’ she continued as she saw Lady Fleming’s woebegone countenance.

She is on her way to play prompter even now, as she rolls swiftly through Kensington with Lord George Burke, her *attaché pro tem*. Of course they are the first to arrive at the pretty villa, which by means of flowers and bits of well-distributed colour has been turned into a fairy palace under Lady Susan’s supervision. The young *châtelaine*, in a soft white satin dress of Worth’s especial *façon*, is standing in trembling expectation by the side of her sombre-looking spouse when Lady Susan, rustling in pale blue silk and bristling over with importance, enters on the scene.

‘I am very glad you have come, Susan, for the little lady here is growing very nervous.’

‘Pooh, nonsense, Cis—you must learn to take life as you find it. We mean to have some good fun to day, don’t we, Lord George? By the way—what a breach of good manners!—I have not introduced you. I suppose I thought everyone who knew me knew you.’

Lord George shook the hand held out to him by his hostess, for whom he declared at once. Cicely had a way of winning men with a glance—probably because it was a matter of indifference to her whether they liked her or not.

‘Everything looks charming,’ went on rattling Lady Susan, ‘except Hubert; and if he is going to play death’s head at his own *fête* I’ll have him shut up in a top room or

send him into the City, to join Mr. Verulam.'

'I am all right—never felt more lively in my life,' said Sir Hubert, smiling.

The truth is he was uncommonly nervous over this plunge he was making back into old scenes on Cicely's account, and he tried to hide it by assuming a dignified composure, which only served to give him a sort of undertaker-air excessively displeasing to Lady Sue.

'Well, people will begin to arrive soon, no doubt,' she went on. 'Remember, Cis, you are not to think of introducing anyone (as if Cis would have dared), and stop near me at first, so as to get the cue for pretty speeches—then we shall do all right. What a joke this is!—just like private theatricals before the curtain goes up. Dear me, there is one

thing we have omitted, and something very important too.'

'What is that?' asked Sir Hubert, anxiously.

'We have not got even the faintest approach at royalty to stick up and worship at the end of the lawn; and a party of any sort now-a-days without a bit of royalty is a very small thing.'

'This will be the blessed exception,' said Lord George, laughing, partly at the joke, but chiefly at Cicely's puzzled face. She was not yet sufficiently *au fait* in her new world to appreciate Lady Susan's somewhat satirical chaff.

In quick succession the carriages began to set down the expected guests, and Cicely did not find the position of hostess half as formidable as she had expected. Algy Duncombe had arrived, and was sharing

with Lady Susan the onerous duties of entertaining, keeping up between them as they did so a running fire of repartee, putting everyone at their ease, and starting them off amid laughter down into the garden, on which, fortunately for the success of the whole concern, the sun was shining brightly and warmly, though the summer was yet young. Sir Hubert had found several old friends; and knowing that his wife was in good hands, he too had wandered into the grounds for some pleasant chat.

Three times Lord George had sought to lure Lady Sue away from her post at the door, but with all her careless levity she was not devoid of loyalty. She would not desert Cicely till the last guest had arrived, though Algy had long since fluttered away in the Bertrands' train. For, strange to relate, Mrs. Bertrand had actually condescended to grace

Cicely's party with her presence. But what inconsistency will not a match-making mother with two marriageable daughters commit in order to get one more occasion of exhibiting them in public? Lady Susan has, however, at last acceded to Lord George's request that she will come and have a saunter in the grounds, and Cicely is left talking to a group of people to whom policy suggests that they should make themselves agreeable to this young beauty, who is not unlikely to become one of Fashion's rulers. Cicely has cast off a good deal of her shyness ; everything has gone smoothly, there is no cause for anxiety, but still for all that she feels a want. All the invited guests have not come ; in fact, the only one she cared to see is absent. She lingers in the drawing-room talking, instead of joining the crowd on the lawn. Is it so wholly impossible that he may arrive yet, or

is that first friend Cicely ever had in the world suddenly turned into an enemy and going to shun her in the future? The sudden thought brings a gulp into her throat even as she stands there laughing pleasantly.

No, she has prejudged him; for there is Harry Durant in *propria personâ* coming in at the door.

Young hearts untutored in the world's schooling are apt to be expansive. Cicely flushed up to the roots of her hair, and with an exclamation of delight rushed forward to meet him. Those around smiled and wondered what the lien was between them.

'I was so afraid you did not mean to come; and my first party without you could not have been a success,' she said, warmly.

He looked into her eyes as he gently pressed her extended hand.

'Thank God I have been mistaken—it

is all well with her,' he thought. 'She does not care for me.'

Harry Durant, like many others of his brethren, failed to read the signs aright.

'I am glad not to have disappointed you,' he said, cheerily. 'Where is Fleming?'

'Oh, in the garden somewhere. But I want so much to talk to you, Mr. Durant. I never heard of your accident till after I came to London. Why did you not write, or get some one to write? It was too unkind of you.'

'The letter must have miscarried. French posts, perhaps, are not so reliable as English ones, Lady Fleming.'

'You did write then? Ah, I wish I had known. But why do you call me Lady Fleming?'

'Is it not your name?'

‘Well, yes—but to you I was always Cis. Does being married take all one’s friends away?’

‘Certainly not—most people find that it increases their number. A home to receive in, a fortune to spend, usually multiply the insects who are ever ready to fatten on and sting the hand that tenders benefits.’

‘How bitter you are to-day!’ said Cicely, gravely. ‘Are you angry with me?’

‘My dear Lady Fleming, could I so presume, by what right should I be angry with you?’

‘By that of old friendship, I suppose. Though we have not known each other long,’ she went on, dreamily. ‘This time last year I was running about Swinton woods, and had never seen you.’

‘Now you are Lady Fleming—the happiest of the happy—the envied possessor of

wealth and position. That is the other side of the picture, I think, is it not?’

‘No, emphatically no. I would give all, everything I have in the world, to be back at Swinton as I was last year.’

‘Cicely—Lady Fleming—what does this mean? Do you not know that to turn back when once you have started on life’s highway is impossible?’

‘Yes, I know it well,’ she answered, looking at him through the mist which hung over her eyes; ‘and I have sworn to be honest and true. I will keep my word.’

‘Amen!’ was half-muttered through his thick beard; but she heard it nevertheless, and there was a short silence. Everyone had left the drawing-room—they were quite alone. *Tête-à-têtes* had grown dangerous between these two—perhaps they both recognised the unavowed fact; and Harry Durant

was already beginning to fear he had formed too hastily his judgment on symptoms.

‘I had a letter from Burke the other day—he asks about you,’ he said at last, seeking to break the awkward pause by a more or less commonplace remark.

‘Mr. Burke! Ah, how much I should like to see him! Please say all sorts of kind things to him from me. He never wrote to congratulate me when I married—I wonder why? Did no one think it was a subject for congratulation, Mr. Durant? Yet Sir Hubert is very kind.’

‘Had you been the most intriguing young lady in Europe you could scarcely have done better,’ was the somewhat bitter answer; then hurriedly, as he noted Cicely’s pained expression, ‘Fleming is *au fond* a most amiable, good fellow. It will be entirely

your own fault if you do not get on well with him.'

'And who says I do not get on?' asked Cicely, a little piqued. 'I should not have married him if I had not meant to behave properly.'

'Of course not.' And Mr. Durant bowed his head as he made a slight move towards the garden.

Cicely and he passed down the steps together.

'Have you heard anything of Mrs. Fitzalan?' she asked. He stopped at once and turned abruptly round.

'Was she kind to you, Cicely? Or did she force you to do things against your will?'

'Force me!' answered Cicely, who scarcely liked his tone. 'Do you think I am such a baby as to be a mere plaything in Mrs. Fitzalan's hands?'

‘It is well—as long as you were allowed to exercise free will I have no fault to find.’

‘If those who might have influenced me kept aloof, naturally I listened to Mrs. Fitzalan,’ she said, more meekly.

‘Just so; and having no principle herself, she did not think it necessary in other people.’

‘Mr. Durant, how can you talk like that? You are horridly disagreeable to-day. There is Rose Bertrand—perhaps you will find her society more pleasant than mine.’

Thus dismissed, Mr. Durant passed on from the foot of the steps where they had been lingering and joined, not his cousins, but other acquaintances; while Cicely did her little best as hostess, feeling wearied and heart-sick the while. How gladly would she have gone upstairs and indulged in a good cry in the solitude of her own room!

But she must not give way—the comedietta in which she was elected to take a leading part must be played out to the end. On the whole she was acquitting herself most creditably; though, when she received an occasional word of praise and encouragement from Sir Hubert or Lady Susan as she passed them, they neither of them could form the faintest conjecture of how difficult was the struggle for outward appearances which the young bride was making with herself. Once again *they* met and spoke in the throng, but this time gay Lady Susan led the conversation, and from her heart Cicely thanked her, as she listened to her lively banter, and heard Harry Durant reply in the pleasant tone which was more identified with himself than the bitter one he had chosen to use to Cicely.

‘Well, Cis, it is nearly over, and it has

been a success. But, child, you look as pale as ashes ; I am afraid you are tired to death.' And Lady Susan turned to Cicely, after a last little shot fired at Harry Durant. 'Get her a glass of wine, there is a good man.'

'No, thank you ; really I do not want it. I am not ill, only naturally nervous, I suppose.'

'Will you not at least sit down, Lady Fleming ? You have been standing about for hours.'

She took the chair Harry Durant offered her, but did not trust herself to thank him. His measured tones whenever he addressed her were almost more than she could bear. Nearly everyone had gone, save intimates, and Sir Hubert and Algy came up at this moment.

'Why, Durant, I have scarcely had a word with you. Stop to dinner and tell us

all about your accident. Cis has been wondering several times how it could have happened.' And Sir Hubert laid his hand familiarly on his old friend's shoulder.

'Thank you, Fleming, but I am afraid I must get back to town.'

'Nonsense; I won't take no, for I don't believe you have an engagement. Here, Cis, persuade Durant to stop—you have more influence than I have.'

'I shall be very glad Mr. Durant, if you will,' she said simply.

'Yes, I will drive you back. I have got my phaeton here, and I am going to stay,' chimed in Algy Duncombe.

'There, that is settled.' And Sir Hubert, taking it for granted, though Harry Durant had not spoken, walked across to thank Lady Susan for her assistance and express his

regrets that her engagements in town prevented her from staying for the evening.

‘Shall I go, or stay?’ asked Durant, leaning over the back of Cicely’s chair.

‘Stay,’ she said, ‘of course. I wonder you can ask such a question.’ And again he was baffled as to whether she cared for him or not, so thoroughly off hand was the merely hostess-like answer she contrived to give him.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE QUICKSANDS.

BACK to London, to dress hastily, eat a *tête-à-tête* dinner with Mr. Verulam, and then go off to three parties, each more crowded than the other—such was the life *au grand galop* in which Lady Sue's days and nights were passed. No wonder she was *au fait* at all the little stories which floated about on the surface of town-talk. To-night she is a sort of heroine, for has she not been the favoured individual selected to launch Lady Fleming, and is not Lady Fleming, although she knows it not, the one subject of Society's conversation just now?

‘Who is she? Where did Fleming pick her up?’ are queries which assail Lady Susan as she appears in each drawing-room in succession.

‘She is so charming I am quite in love with her; so I don’t know what the men must be,’ she is saying to an inquisitive old dowager, who, not having been included in the number of Cicely’s guests, is more curious than the rest.

‘It is positively sickening,’ chimed in Mrs. Bertrand, ‘especially when I can remember her a dirty brat making mud-pies in our lanes.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Bertrand, you know her then?’ And the general attention is at once transferred from Lady Sue, who in all loyalty to her cousin and his wife vouchsafes no information to Mrs. Bertrand, who is spitefully anxious to be cross-examined.

‘Know her? Yes, of course. Her old grandfather was our lodge-keeper.’

‘But you were at her party to-day.’ It was Lady Susan’s voice speaking through a chorus of ‘Oh’s!’ ‘I wonder you went; in fact, I wonder you go to anyone who is not in the stud-book. For my part, I don’t mind. Mr. Verulam’s father was a tanner, but it does not make my diamonds glisten less brightly or my clothes smell of hides.’ And Lady Sue finished her sentence with a gay laugh, in which all the little circle of talkers joined, except Mrs. Bertrand, who said, gravely—

‘I am—I own it—a stickler for old forms. I hate the levelling system of the present day, by which every milkmaid and every drayman can get into society, if they have only money enough to pay their way.’

‘Stuff about old forms!’ cried Lady Sue.

‘Since King Cophetua married the beggar-maid, beauty has had the power of turning street-girls into peeresses ; and a very good thing too. I repeat that Lady Fleming is perfectly charming, and I throw the gauntlet down to anyone who chooses to dispute the fact with me.’

‘Brava, Lady Susan!’ Of course the ejaculation came from a man. But Mrs. Bertrand was not to be so easily thwarted. She looked carefully round to see that her doves were out of hearing ; then, dropping her voice, she said, mysteriously—

‘It might perhaps be as well if Lady Susan Verulam were to inquire more carefully into the antecedents of the people on whom she bestows her patronage.’

‘Ah, Mrs. Bertrand, you know all about it. Do let us have it,’ said the dowager aforesaid ; and the little knot of people drew

more closely round; while Lady Susan's face assumed a half-defiant, half-amused expression.

'I believe we are all friends here. I would not otherwise ask these questions for the world. But the lady with whom this girl was living in Paris, who is she? The relations my nephew, Mr. Durant, bears to her, what are they?'

It was evident that Mr. Durant had cooled somewhat of late in those attentions to Rose which she had once thought so promising.

'What a wicked woman you must be to say such things! that is, unless you can thoroughly substantiate them,' burst out Lady Susan.

'I have said nothing—I only asked two questions. Can you answer them?'

'As for the lady in Paris, I know nothing

about her. Lady Fleming was with her a very short time, and does not seem to have cared much for her. And relations between her and Mr. Durant simply do not exist. He is an old friend of Sir Hubert's, and stayed to dine there to-night.'

Incautious Lady Sue! in your honest open-heartedness you are no match for Mrs. Bertrand, ever on the look-out for information to feed her spite.

'Harry Durant dining at the Flemings'! Well, I should not have believed Sir Hubert to be such a fool. He has been deceived once; I wonder it did not teach him wariness.'

There was a general titter. How delighted everyone was to get even the vaguest suggestion from which a good story might be circulated against the bride! everybody but Lady Susan, who was really angry, and

‘longed to horsewhip that good-for-nothing, malicious woman.’ She had recovered her prudence, however, since her last speech, for she laughed gaily as she said :—

‘What absurd ideas people will take in their heads! Why, Cicely and Mr. Durant are on the most distant terms, while she is over head and ears in love with her husband.’

Sir Hubert had not been so thoroughly wanting in acumen when he selected Lady Susan as a friend for his wife, though he little guessed how necessary a worldly-wise woman would be to Cicely in the vicissitudes through which she was about to pass. Poor Cicely! her troubles had begun even now, though she did not know what large stones Mrs. Bertrand was throwing in the rough road along which she was destined to pass, nor how Lady Susan was resolved to

find out everything, and do her best to remove these stumbling-blocks from her way. 'She must have a careful talk with Sir Hubert, whom in her *laissez-aller* fashion she had forgotten to ask about his young wife's antecedents ; but it was imperative that Society should be silenced. As for the lady she was living with in Paris, as long as she did not appear on the scene it did not much matter who she was. She could not be very shady, since everyone seemed to know her. What was her name ?' (This latter sentence aloud.)

'Whose name ?' asked her shadow, Lord George.

'The woman Lady Fleming was with in Paris.'

'Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan.'

'Ah, yes. Did you know her ?'

'A little.'

‘What is she like?’

‘Well, she is a fashion. No one knows where she came from, and I should not imagine she always moved in the world to which she now belongs.’

‘Now why do you make that assertion, Lord George? You are getting as cynical as Algy Duncombe. By the bye, he will be able to tell me all about this Mrs. Fitz.’

‘He does not know any more than I do. We have talked the matter over fifty times. There is one man who could tell you, though, Lady Susan,’ he continued, dropping his voice to a whisper—‘Durant.’

‘Good gracious! You don’t mean to say there is any truth in Mrs. Bertrand’s insinuations?’

‘They have as much foundation, I suppose, as malicious reports generally have. I know nothing positively, but I have

always suspected a *liaison* of some sort between Durant and Mrs. Fitz.'

'Mercy! But that has nothing to do with us—the case in point is about Lady Fleming.'

'Well, it is odd that she should have been fished out of a country village to go and live with Mrs. Fitz in Paris.'

'Really, Lord George, I'll dismiss you from my acquaintance if you retail such abominable scandal. Recollect, too, if you are to be my friend you must be Cicely's. I will not have a word uttered against her in my presence.'

'With all my heart,' he responded.

She then went on, as though thinking—

'But this is a very strange amalgamation; I shall not be able to sleep for thinking of it. How all these people are jumbled up together, too! So Cis comes from Swin-

ton, does she? Why, your cousin is the Vicar, is he not, Lord George?’

‘Yes; but he is a sententious old beggar. It would not be worth the railway fare to go and ask him questions, for all the answers you would get.’

Lord George was a poor man, and had a wise habit of reckoning his shillings.

‘Oh, but I *must* know something; I shall not rest till I do.’

‘Really, Lady Susan, I thought you hated scandal.’

‘So I do; but this is not scandal, only a desire to befriend Cicely and frustrate ill-natured remarks.’

‘Then why not ask her for the truth?’

‘*À la bonne heure*, Lord George—that is the best suggestion I have heard yet; but you always were celebrated for your good sense in a quiet way. Come and give me an ice or

something—listening to all these innuendoes has made me feel quite faint.’

And while Cicely and her past life are being canvassed from every point of view by sundry London coteries, she is striving to the best of her power to entertain her husband’s guests with natural grace and as much easy *insouciance* as she can command. The main line of the conversation is plied by Algy Duncombe, who rattles on with his smart nonsense till he rouses the others into a temporary forgetfulness of themselves, and prevents Sir Hubert from marking the evident restraint and coolness which has sprung up between them. How Cicely thanked him in her heart, as she felt she could lean on his brotherly regard ! And yet Algy was quite unwittingly making himself very useful. It never entered his head to read between the

lines ; and when he remarked that ‘Fleming’s champagne would do them all good, for Lady Fleming looked very tired, and Durant was as stupid as an owl,’ it was in all good faith that he made the observation.

‘Since his accident he had not been the same,’ was Durant’s constant excuse ; ‘it had unnerved him somehow. He talked of going for a change, but he was too lazy to face the travelling.’

‘When London palls come down here for a bit—there is more air here than in the metropolis ; and Cicely and I will do our best to amuse you,’ was Sir Hubert’s invitation.

Cicely played with her dinner and did not attempt to speak or even look up, for she felt the crimson colour rush even to her brow.

‘Well, Cis, will you not welcome Durant?’ said Sir Hubert, appealing to her for the second time that day on his friend’s behalf.

‘Oh, yes, certainly, with pleasure. I was not attending to what you were saying. I was thinking of that funny woman who came with the Bertrands—what did you tell me her name was, Mr. Duncombe?’

Ah, Cicely! what strides you are making in the art of hiding your feelings!

Harry Durant looked up in amazement. The mixture of warm feeling and cool indifference with which she had treated him to-day completely baffled him; but Algy Duncombe answered, gaily—

‘Oh, she is a Miss Croxton—an heiress—a sort of connexion of yours, isn’t she, Durant?’

‘Thank the stars, no. She belongs to

Mrs. Bertrand, and is almost as evil-tongued as my dear aunt herself.'

'Nonsense ; why don't you go in for her, old fellow ? She is rather long in the tooth, and bald about the pate, but the money-bags are of the heaviest ; at least so they say. Of course a journey to Doctors' Commons, to ascertain the exact amount of defunct Croxton's will, would be advisable before committing oneself to such a bargain.'

'Thank you, Algy, my boy, but have you not yet learnt that the inestimable blessing of liberty is not to be rashly tampered with ? Possessing mine, as I do, I feel scarcely inclined to part with it lightly.'

A sudden chill seemed to pass over Cicely—the flush faded from her cheeks—she became as white as the dress she wore. 'Then he was not going to marry Rose

Bertrand after all ! What wicked lies Mrs. Fitzalan had told her ! ’


‘ Durant, you are a fool,’ Algy had gone on. ‘ It is high time a vagrant like you settled down into matrimony—I am sure Mrs. Bertrand would tell you so.’

‘ No doubt, but she would not thank you for pairing me off with “ beauty Croxton,” as the wags call her,’ he answered, with a forced laugh ; ‘ though she has cooled considerably to me of late—I have not been asked to dinner for a fortnight.’

‘ Neglect, my dear fellow—she thinks neglect will bring you on.’

‘ Not a bit of it ; she has given me up as a bad job, and is flying at that fair fellow Seton, who has lately put in an appearance in London—has a yacht, in which he has been round the world, or some nonsense.’

Algy burst into a spluttering laugh.



‘He won’t bite. By Jove, that is too good. Fleming, do you remember curly-haired Seton?—you and I met him once at Homburg—the fastest little ne’er-do-weel in the place. Fancy Mrs. Bertrand angling after him!’

‘Money, my dear Algy—you forget the requisites,’ suggested Mr. Durant.

Again Algy laughed uncontrollably.

‘He has flown kites till all the paper in Israel is used up. So he is Mrs. B.’s last, is he? Really she is too delicious.’

‘Mr. Duncombe, you should not talk so of May’s mother—it is very naughty,’ said Cicely, meekly, feeling she must say something, unless she wished her silence to be noticed.

‘That is right, Cis, call them to order—they will want it, both of them, I can tell you, for they are merry spirits.’ And

Sir Hubert smiled across the table at his wife.

‘I would not malign my future mother-in-law for the world,’ said Algy ‘if I did not feel she thoroughly deserved it.’

‘I should recommend you to wait till she is your mother-in-law, Algy, old fellow,’ suggested Sir Hubert.

‘Ah, I wish the old thing was in heaven—but she sticks so persistently to the earth. May and I will have to elope.’

‘I’ll help you,’ cried Harry Durant. ‘I hate to see people parted who were meant to be joined, for the sake of a mere whim.’

‘Oh, Mr. Durant, I thought you were a partisan of order.’

Again it was Cicely’s voice that spoke.

‘I am a partisan of straight-forwardness, Lady Fleming, and I hate duplicity in every form. People ought to know what they

like and want in this world, and be able to stick to it.'

Cicely shut up once more like a closed book, but Algy as usual put in his word.

'Very well in theory, Durant; but you know the old axiom about principles coming from the angels, actions from the devil.'

Mr. Durant looked at him fixedly for a moment. Had the remark a direction and an aim, or was it a mere random shot? There was fortunately no opportunity for an answer, as Cicely rose—only too thankful to make her escape.

'It was a pleasure to see Harry Durant. Ay, but what a pain lay at the root! If only Sir Hubert would not ask him! What could she do to prevent it? Tell him the truth she dared not. Appeal to Harry Durant himself? No, she should never have the courage, at all events not yet. She must

wait the issue of events,' and she sat and thought over her troubles and wept her girlish tears in the drawing-room, all by herself, for nearly an hour, while the men were talking their familiar talk in the dining-room. At last she starts up and seeks a corner of the sofa where she will be so shaded from the light that no traces of recent tears shall be perceived. It is only Algy; and how readily she welcomes him as 'nobody' and throws herself with all the spirit she can command into the light, bantering conversation in which he always revels, so that when the others at last follow him she is quite her own natural self—unreserved in her talk, which even with Harry Durant flows currently.

And as the evening passes pleasantly away, any danger-signals which may point to misadventure in the future are unheeded.

CHAPTER IX.

FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE RIDICULOUS.

SPRING has given place to summer, the snows have melted on the mountains ; and Mrs. Fitzalan, bidding adieu to Babette and Mère Françoise, sets out to wander deeper into the wilderness—farther from the tramp of human footsteps and the track of civilisation. She is growing used to the vast solitude. The passions and torments which distract her mind and rebel at the thought of being coerced by the petty worries of every-day conventional life, can have their full swing in these wild regions and rage themselves out at will. The villagers, unused to

strangers, think her odd, perhaps half-witted. But what matters? She wants but little—even the black bread and goat's milk of the country content her when she can get no better fare. She has left the smiling valleys, with their fecundity of vegetation, and has travelled for miles across vast downs almost too bleak and rocky for the mountain-herds to find pasturage. It seems a mad, insensate scheme to give up the luxuries of her Parisian home and start alone on this sort of endless pilgrimage, but the longing to go out into infinity had come over her, and it must be gratified. After days spent in ascending the rocky upland she reaches at last a village which lies on the outskirts of a forest; there she obtains shelter for the night, and early on the morrow plunges into the depth of a wood in which black pines rear their majestic heads on the mountain side, crowning

with their beauty and their grandeur the amphitheatre which lies below them. Once in the midst of these dark masses there is not even a footpath to be seen ; the sun peeping occasionally through the mighty trees which obscure it with their foliage is the only guide, and onward Mrs. Fitzalan strides as though impelled by fate. Many an old monarch remains standing, though his leaves are yellow, and his roots, no longer imbedded in the parent earth, are covered with green moss ; others have succumbed to the power of time and are lying in sombre state beside the ever-running stream which bubbles down from the summit of the mountain. Flowers of every colour burst into life on each side of the water and vie with brilliant butterflies in producing the contrast which is so effectively striking when compared with the denser parts of the forest. After wan-

dering on for some time she reaches an open swamp, on the banks of which the larger trees cease to exist, but are replaced by a colony of elder-trees, whose red fruit mingling with the wild honeysuckle forms a copse, in which the leaves of the raspberry flutter in the breeze, presenting now their verdant now their silvered surfaces. On the other side of this copse the pines again grow so closely together that it is almost impossible to pass them, the way, too, being difficult, and the rapid decline covered with slippery green moss. At no great distance there is the rushing of a mighty torrent, though it is continually hid from view by blocks of rock and the large leaves of the herbaceous plants.

Having arrived at the bottom of the ravine, Mrs. Fitzalan sits down on a fallen tree which forms a natural bridge across the water, and for a long time she remains there

almost immovable, drinking in to the full the knowledge of her utter loneliness, glorying in the sensation that among all her numerous acquaintance no one would find her here. But inscrutable are the workings of fate. Round a corner formed by a projecting tree two men pass on a sudden into sight; they are evidently tourists, lured like herself into these haunts by the deep fascination of the silent solitudes. A little cry almost escapes her as she sees them, for not once but many times have they both been her guests. They, however, heed her not, but follow the course of the stream, while she, hoping to remain unperceived, begins to ascend from the ravine, where the heat is becoming oppressive. Many-coloured butterflies hover about, and bright insects run gaily over the leaves of the plants; the cry of the woodpecker breaks the almost deathlike

silence, and flies fasten themselves on her hands and face—sure presages of a coming storm. As she climbs farther and farther the wind howls piteously among the branches of the trees ; and the sun, but lately so scorching in its power, is hidden behind swiftly passing clouds. Flash after flash of lightning succeed each other rapidly ; the distant thunder growls its angry menace. Then for a moment all is still—the voices of the birds cease, the butterflies stop their gambols, and the insects hide themselves beneath the large plants which alone court the coming rain. After this brief space of ominous silence, the wind grows louder and louder ; huge pieces of wood and branches of trees tear through the air in rapid succession ; the lightning and thunder follow each other instantaneously, the clouds grow blacker and blacker, till the darkness of night prevails.

Trees are uprooted on all sides, and the crash with which they fall is undistinguishable from the booming of the thunder, while the rain begins to descend in torrents. For more than half an hour Mrs. Fitzalan, the pampered queen of fashionable Paris, hangs on for protection to a young pine, and listens awestricken and breathless to the wild scene which passes round her, augmented as it is too by the echoes which triple every sound. At last, when she is wellnigh fainting from sheer exhaustion, a sudden lull prevails ; the rain grows less violent, the darkness less dense, the huge black clouds transform themselves into moving masses of misty vapour which hang about the pine-trees. In an incredibly short space of time harmony, as though recalled by magic, reigns once more ; and except for the mountain streamlets which during the last half-hour have been

transformed into torrents, all symptoms of storm are hushed—for as the sun bursts forth in glory a balmy smell fills the air, and nature begins forthwith visibly to restore the devastation wrought by the elements; and so rapid is vegetation in these parts that even as you gaze flowers seem to unfold their petals, fungi of all species to burst into life.

Wet to the skin, and terribly startled and impressed by the great disruption of nature she had so lately beheld, Mrs. Fitzalan began to grope her way through the rain-bespattered, tangled underwood in the direction of some cottages she had perceived at starting; but it was no easy journey, the ground had become so slippery from the rain that it was but seldom she could succeed in establishing a sure footing. At last, after a long and exhausting walk, she saw before

her a rude hut or cabin. She hailed the sight with a more lively sensation of delight than she had felt since her impromptu flight from Paris. Wet, chilled, and footsore, animal instincts were superseding those wild tumultuous feelings she had allowed to be so dominant of late, and she longed for the companionship of a fellow-being, the sight of a friendly face. Bitter, then, was her disappointment when, on knocking loudly at the closed door of the hut, she received no answer from within ; naught but the solitudes responded as the wind gently stirred the foliage around.

‘Come what may, I can go no farther,’ Mrs. Fitzalan murmured as she threw herself almost fainting down on a soft piece of turf in front of the cottage. How long she lay there she scarcely knew, for consciousness and strength both deserted her. She

was at last awakened to the former by hearing the sound of voices.

‘Dieu, c’est la veuve Anglaise des Champs Elysées.’

‘Comment—impossible.’

‘Bien vrai, c’est elle, et à demi morte—sans doute elle s’est égarée—que faire, mon Dieu?’

The voices were those of the two men she had seen some hours ago in the ravine.

For a moment or two after she recognised them she did not speak nor move. ‘What explanation could she give? Ah! they had provided one. She had lost her way and her companions.’ She raised herself and looked at them with a sort of stare. Mrs. Fitzalan never laid wholly on one side her capabilities for acting.

‘Where am I?’ she asked. ‘I suppose I have lost myself. Never will I start on a

mountainous expedition again. Ah, Monsieur de Germont, how comes it that you are here?’

‘*Mais*, madame, like yourself, we are in search of the beauties of *la grande nature*. For us men it is rough work ; *pour une dame organisée comme vous* it is almost impossible.’

‘We English are fond of roaming, and have a marvellous capability for enduring,’ she said, smiling, as she rose.

Mrs. Fitzalan was fully sensible that the situation in which she had placed herself savoured somewhat of the ridiculous, but like a true woman she resolved to face it unflinchingly. Her toilette, on the perfect *cachet* of which she had always prided herself, was draggled and travel-stained. This knowledge, perhaps, sat more heavily on her mind as she found herself face to face with

two members of the *jeunesse dorée*, than the recollection of all the manifold reasons and miseries, both real and imaginary, which had induced her to leave Paris.

‘I am very wet and tired. Is there no making anyone hear in that cottage?’ she asked her companions.

‘Just what we were hoping to do before we had the honour of finding madame. A fire and a hot “grog” would indeed be welcome at this moment. *Moi j’ai du cognac si madame en veut.*’

Mrs. Fitzalan, on the mountain side, unattended, exhausted, *chiffonnée*, drinking cognac with two Paris exquisites, who by some freak of chance had, notwithstanding the storm, retained the pristine freshness of garment with which they had set out in the morning! Here was a descent from the wild poetry of her somewhat incoherent

dreams. She accepted the situation, however, with a smile, and drank the cognac thankfully. No, there was no rousing the inmates of the hut. It was evidently merely a *pied à terre* for some shepherd, and, if they succeeded in opening it, would afford but little accommodation. It was roughly built, with no windows, only slits in the wall, through which light and air were but imperfectly admitted; and, on scrambling up to look through one of them M. de Germont discovered there was naught in the interior save some straw for a bed, a rickety table, and some tin pots. Fireplace there was none, unless a spot under a hole in the roof, marked by a few burnt-out sticks, might be so called.

‘*Tiens!* what is to be done?’ And the Frenchmen looked at each other inquiringly.

‘*Les Burons!*’ cried M. de Germont, as

though struck by a sudden inspiration. 'Can madame walk a little farther? *Bien sûr*, they are not far.'

'Oh, yes, if I am likely to find a temporary *gîte* for a few hours, however rough it may be. Let us start at once. M. de Germont's cognac has revived me.'

She gathered her clinging wet skirts round her and followed M. de Germont, who undertook to serve as guide to the *Burons*. After nearly three-quarters of an hour of rough uneven walking, during which Mrs. Fitzalan's physical powers were being tried to the utmost, they arrived at the promised *gîte*.

Les Burons, where cheeses are made and during the five or six months of winter the cattle are sheltered from the snows, are nothing more than niches on the side of the mountain, the front part being composed of branches of trees and dried turf, while the

larger portion of the cave or hut is subterraneous. In the interior of these pastoral cabins there are three divisions, for they can scarcely be dignified by the name of rooms. In the first the fire necessary for domestic purposes is lighted, the smoke escaping from a small opening among the branches; in the second chamber the utensils in use for cheese-making are ranged; and the third or back portion of the hut is employed as a resting place for the herdsmen, who sleep in boxes or drawers made of pine-branches, with nothing but a little straw or heather by way of bed. The shepherds, however, share the possession of even these rude couches with the cheeses, which when nearly ready in a state in which they are called 'fourmes' frequently dispute with the herdsmen the possession of their primitive sleeping quarters. The large dogs which guard the

cattle when grazing on the mountains are also admitted into the general chamber of rest, and it is not unusual for six or eight pigs to break through the thin partition which divides the sty appropriated to them from the rest of the hut, and to join this singular reunion of men, beasts, and cheeses. A strange complication, and one from which even rigid cleanliness cannot succeed in excluding a mixture of inhalations which would speedily be condemned by an English sanitary commission as unhealthful, if not actually pestiferous.

To this small outlying colony did M. de Germont conduct Mrs. Fitzalan, and thankful enough she was to hail even this primitive dwelling-place, though in her heart she was sorely disappointed when she beheld it. Wandering among the vast Auvergne solitudes alone with her uncontrollable

passions was grand in idea, but Mrs. Fitzalan was too accustomed to dwell in luxury ever to have thought it possible that such a 'horrible place,' as she mentally designated the 'Burons,' could possibly exist, or that human beings could herd together thus with animals. Being summer-time, the cattle and shepherds were on the heights; but the cheese-making portion of the establishment was working busily, and more than one good-natured peasant came forward to offer such hospitality as the place afforded to the poor tired lady who had been drenched in the storm. In fact, so hearty were they in their offers of assistance that Mrs. Fitzalan almost forgot her aversion to the *entourage* in the novelty of the situation. She was ere long habited in various *paysanne* garments; and, pleased with her own appearance in the becoming dress of the

Auvergnate, she once more assumed towards her two companions the manners and commands of a *grande dame*.

Even while she sat there languidly sipping goat's milk and eating with some distaste the *fromage du pays* she never forgot that it was necessary to escape from this adventure in a manner as little compromising as possible to her own dignity. She had not owned to the fact of being quite alone; she had missed her party was the only explanation she had vouchsafed. To get rid of the two men who had done her faithful service in her emergency must be her next effort.

‘I cannot walk another yard to-day,’ she said. ‘This little peasant girl has promised to make me up a bed for the night. It will be something to talk of when one gets back to Paris.’

‘ Ah, madame, to think of you in a place like this ! And your friends, they will be alarmed. What can we do ? ’

‘ Return to your hotel—at St. Nectaire I think you said you were staying—and take with you my warmest thanks for your escort and protection.’

‘ *Comment*, madame, and leave you here alone ? ’

‘ One of these worthy *montagnards* will conduct me to-morrow in his *charrette* as far as La Queuille, where, at the little *auberge*, I shall meet or at least hear tidings of my friends.’

‘ But, madame, I will accompany you with pleasure,’ cried M. de Germont. ‘ For you to drive over this *terrain mouvementé* in a *charrette* is not to be thought of ; and the *auberge* at La Queuille is a miserable place.’

‘ In rough countries one must use oneself

to rough ways. If I had not desired a thorough change I should scarcely have left Paris, M. de Germont.'

'But to leave you here alone, madame!'

'The story, when related for the amusement of some *coterie de ville*, will sound less compromising,' she answered, haughtily.

'Ah, madame, *vous me croyez capable*.'

'I believe all men capable of everything, and never trust them,' she replied, half-laughing.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'We have our dismissal,' he said, turning to his friend. '*Partons—au revoir*, madame, in Paris.'

'*Au revoir, messieurs, et mille remerciemens*.'

CHAPTER X.

M. BARBIER.

VICTORINE is lounging idly in a *fauteuil*, looking out of the window. Since Mrs. Fitzalan has left her apartments in the Champs Elysées Victorine has put her work on one side and given herself up to '*les petits plaisirs de ce monde*;' but it is raining, and it is scarcely worth spoiling her clothes by going to the fête at Asnières, so she is bewailing her ill-luck and trying to yawn herself into a good humour.

A hired carriage rolls lazily under the *porte cochère*, but Victorine heeds it not till

the bell is pulled violently ; then she shakes herself and goes to the door.

‘ Madame—*quel plaisir*—and I who have looked for you with impatience. But, *Dieu*, what clothes ! Where have you been ? ’

‘ Get me coffee, and I will tell you all about it. Where is Celestine ? Desire her to get dinner quickly.’

‘ *Tout le monde est sorti*, I alone watch the *appartement de madame*. But madame shall have coffee directly.’

‘ And a *peignoir, vite*.’

So, after all the tumult and rage and fury, Mrs Fitzalan’s coming home was a very common-place affair—she had gone out like a lioness and she returned to all outward appearance as a dove. The meeting with M. de Germont and his friend had cured her. No, she could not stand, even although she heard them not, the sort of

remarks she felt sure her prolonged secret absence from Paris would call forth. And half an hour afterwards, when, having got rid of her drabbled, untidy garments, she is lying in a pretty *peignoir* on a soft satin couch, sipping her coffee, she smiles complacently to herself as she feels she has worked off the temporary madness, and that after a short rest in her own comfortable nest she will be ready to take up the cards of life once more.

‘Now, madame, *dites donc*. To go off *sans un mot* and leave me here alone ! But it was unheard of.’

‘I could not help it, Victorine—there were reasons, child, which made it imperative that I should take a sudden journey into Auvergne.’

But to be away three months and leave

leave no commands! *Moi, je vous croyais morte.*'

'You waited on, though, in the hope I should come to life again,' said Mrs. Fitzalan, laughing.

'*Le Monseieur Anglais*, he arrive after you are gone. "*Attendez toujours, petite Victorine*, madame will return," he say, "*et j'attends.*"'

Mrs. Fitzalan's brow clouded over.

'How dare he answer for her actions? How could he know that the inward storm would spend itself at last?' But she said no word to Victorine, save to ask her if he had been there again.

'*Non, madame, personne—le monde n'est plus à Paris*—only letters—*dame*, what a correspondence madame has!'

'Bring them, Victorine, and while I read them go and order me a dinner from the

restaurant. Take the key ; I do not care to be disturbed. When Celestine comes in tell her I shall dismiss her. I like my servants to be in readiness.'

'*Tiens ! quel chance—et moi qui grognais la pluie,*' muttered Victorine as she went off, shrugging her shoulders, to do her mistress' bidding.

Mrs. Fitzalan speedily runs her eye over the mass of letters Victorine has left with her, and selects one or two for immediate perusal. There are two from Cicely and one from Sir Hubert, all breathing of content. This pleases her well, for Mrs. Fitzalan has no spite against the girl she had learnt to like, if not to love, during the short time she was with her, and it was not in the programme that she should be made unhappy, except as an inevitable consequence of her acquaintance with others. So far the mis-

sives are satisfactory ; but there is one in a handwriting Mrs. Fitzalan does not recognise. She opens it wearily ; the interest it is likely to afford is *nil*. Yet stay ; she rouses herself as she glances at the signature. A fresh complication has arisen in the somewhat tangled machinery of her life. The signature is that of the Vicar of Swinton. Wherefore has he written now ? for, as Cicely has told Harry Durant, he never vouchsafed a line when he heard of her intended marriage. There is that in his letter which sets Mrs. Fitzalan thinking deeply. She does not seem ruffled or excited, only as if some subject has been brought under her consideration which requires to be steadily worked out, like a problem in Euclid. There is no rashness, no impetuosity about Mrs. Fitzalan now. Perchance her adventure among the mountains has worked off the superfluous

steam and left her more capable of tackling the difficulties of every-day life.

After awhile she went on reading the other letters which lay there, but there was nothing of farther importance, and to the *Madame, est servie*, which Victorine announced, she responded with an amount of appetite which scarcely betokened that she was seriously worried, and drank her Hockheimer as though the good things of this world still afforded enjoyment. Then, after a short rest, Mrs. Fitzalan turned out the contents of the old escritoire, burnt sundry papers, docketed others ; in fact, set herself to work with a business-like energy which could scarcely be without a meaning. Accounts were entered into, long lines of figures added up, and all the fatigue engendered by a long and rapid journey seemed to be wholly forgotten.

Three times has Victorine suggested *que madame doit se coucher*; each time the Abigail has been told to seek her own couch and leave her in peace. At last, however, the work for the time being seems to be ended, and Mrs. Fitzalan stretches herself, with a yawn. A few hours of restless slumber, and she is busy once more, looking through sundry portfolios and desks; then she dresses herself with an amount of care in striking contrast to her mountain toilette. No woman, as Algy Duncombe often says, knows so thoroughly as Mrs. Fitzalan the value of appropriate clothes. On this occasion she wears black, well fitting and rich in texture; a coquettish bunch of poppies in her bonnet being insisted on by Victorine, who hates what she calls *les vêtements de la mort*.

‘Madame is going out alone—shall I not call a *voiture*?’

No. 100 is empty, and I am not writing

The number 100 is of the same
 nature and, with a small number of papers
 in the last volume, I have the same
 character of things in the number 100
 the number 100 is of the same nature
 and, with a small number of papers
 in the last volume, I have the same
 character of things in the number 100

The number 100 is of the same
 nature and, with a small number of papers
 in the last volume, I have the same
 character of things in the number 100
 the number 100 is of the same nature
 and, with a small number of papers
 in the last volume, I have the same
 character of things in the number 100

The number 100 is of the same
 nature and, with a small number of papers
 in the last volume, I have the same
 character of things in the number 100
 the number 100 is of the same nature
 and, with a small number of papers
 in the last volume, I have the same
 character of things in the number 100

pretensions to decoration being the mantel-shelf, with its gay looking-glass and bright clock.

For two or three minutes Mrs. Fitzalan waits there, and then from an imperceptible door in the wall a little fussy, spectacled man makes his appearance. He is neither young nor good-looking, and is decidedly inclined to *embonpoint*, but he has shrewd, hawk-like eyes, which it is evident the spectacles are intended rather to conceal than assist.

‘To what am I indebted for this honour? It is a long time since I have had the pleasure of seeing madame.’

‘I have been away in Auvergne for change?’

‘*Comment*—two years in Auvergne, madame?’

‘Ah, monsieur, it cannot be two years

since we have met.' And Mrs. Fitzalan coloured perceptibly.

For answer he turned to a large book which was on the table and showed her the entry of her last visit.

'But, madame, it rejoices me *not* to see you,' he said, with much politeness, 'for then I know that madame is happy.'

'And you, monsieur—all goes well with you—*belle clientèle*—payments *au jour*—or I on my part should have heard.'

'Thanks for the amiable inquiries of madame, my worldly prospects are fair, considering the abject terrorism which exists in the money market generally.'

'Abject terrorism is to be found in other places besides the money market, M. Barbier; but it can be counteracted by pluck and a high venture. *N'est-ce pas?*'

‘*Si, si, madame, if wisdom and prudence guide the hand that throws.*’

‘A fig for your prudence. Luck is the best thing to court when the stake is high.’ And she looked at him recklessly.

‘*Dieu, madame, what has happened?*’

‘My downfall is threatened, and with it yours, since they are tolerably inseparable.’

‘*Pas tout à fait, madame—pas tout à fait, j’ai amassé un petit peu.*’

‘*Misérable!* Is money all you care for? Are position and good opinion nothing?’

He laughed with a sort of inward chuckle, while the bright eyes sparkled behind the glasses.

‘My experience has taught me that money always commands position,’ he said.

‘Such a position as yours, yes; but mine, M. Barbier?’

‘*Au plaisir de madame—what can I do*



‘Miss Wilson is not dead—two years ago, when I was here, you assured me of her death.’

He looked once more into the large book.

“Mary Wilson—*Anglaise—paralytique, necessiteuse*,” he read out. ‘*Comment, madame, she is as good as dead; she cannot injure—she is in her pays—will not come to Paris.*’

‘Nonsense, M. Barbier. I am astonished at your credulity. She is in London, and though wounded has not lost her fangs. This woman must be silenced. She has given papers to Harry Durant.’

‘*Allons, madame, he seems, then, the most formidable foe.*’

‘Leave him to me,’ said Mrs. Fitzalan, savagely. ‘Only listen. In two days I shall leave for England. You, as my *homme*

d'affaires, will look after my interests and my apartments during my absence. Let everything be done *en règle*. Once in London I will discover the address of Miss Wilson. You will find means to silence her, while I fight the battle with Mr. Durant.'


'Madame is not afraid to show herself in London?'

'I am safer there than here. It was all by your miserable advice that I came to Paris, where at any hour I am liable to detection. Oh, M. Barbier, it is a hateful life.'

'Madame could not exist without excitement, and to have excitement one must endure shadows as well as sunshine.'

'*Chut!* I want no theories. *En un mot*, are you going to remain now, as in the past, my firm ally?'

'As madame has herself observed, her downfall is mine.'



‘*Bon,*’ said Mrs. Fitzalan, tersely ; ‘then you will take these papers and continue to draw my income, and transmit it to the address I shall send you in London. Of course you will pay yourself for your trouble—that I need scarcely tell you. But between such friends as we are, M. Barbier, a few hundred francs is no consideration.’

The little man laughed. He saw full well that fear was haunting Mrs. Fitzalan, or she would not have been so generous with her money.

‘*Un petit détail,*’ he said, ‘since we are on business I should like explained. As I have had the honour to inform madame, it is two years since we met. During the last twelve months an event has occurred—*cette jeune demoiselle?*’

‘Ah, you know all about that!’

‘*J’habite* Paris, renowned for its secret police,’ he said, simply.

1. The first step in the process is to identify the problem or issue that needs to be addressed. This involves gathering information and understanding the context of the problem.

2. Once the problem is identified, the next step is to define the objectives and goals of the project. This helps to clarify what needs to be achieved and provides a clear direction for the team.

3. The third step is to develop a plan or strategy to address the problem. This involves breaking down the problem into smaller, manageable tasks and determining the resources needed to complete each task.

4. The fourth step is to implement the plan. This involves assigning tasks to team members, setting deadlines, and monitoring progress to ensure that the project is on track.

5. The final step is to evaluate the results of the project. This involves comparing the actual outcomes with the objectives and goals to determine the effectiveness of the project and identify areas for improvement.

100

leave everything to you? You must take your pickings while I live, *mon ami*. After my death the disputes will be interminable.'

'I have the proofs,' he answered, quietly.

'And Miss Wilson—*Dieu*, M. Barbier, for an *homme d'affaires* you have lost your head. Miss Wilson has already placed proofs in the possession of Mr. Durant.'

'*Sacré!* Then, with all our cunning, madame, *nous sommes vaincus quand même.*'

'Not yet, not yet. *Restez tranquille*; I will write you word from England—you have not forgotten the old cypher?'

He bowed his head, and she went on—

'If I only knew where to go on arriving in London I would gladly remain incognita for a few weeks till I become mistress of all

details. Later on I can offer a visit to the *nouveaux maries*.'

'*Tenez*, madame, I think I can be of service. I have acquaintance in all countries. This one has a good heart but a weak head—not to be trusted save as an honest man; and, living entirely out of madame's world, he may prove useful at this moment.'

M. Barbier wrote a few lines on a piece of paper and handed them to Mrs. Fitzalan; and then, after a few more parting explanations on remittances of money, &c., the lady rose to depart; and having deposited her bundle of papers, took a friendly farewell of the *petit homme d'affaires* who seemed to be so mysteriously mixed up with the secrets of her life. Two days later Mrs. Fitzalan started for England, after sending Victorine for a few weeks' holi-

day and consigning the key of the apartment to the *concierge*.

Truly, as Victorine observed on starting,
'*Madame a la manie de voyager.*'

CHAPTER XI.

INCOGNITA.

‘*Gott im Himmel*, but the child is mad !
What can I make, what can I make *mit* her ?
Her *gesang* is of the angels ; but for her
spirit—what can I do, *mein Gretchen* ?’

‘It is no use to expect it, father ; you
might as well try to put an untamed zebra
in harness as to turn Deb into a *Haus-*
frau.’

‘I want not a *Hausfrau*—I want an
artiste ; but, with a voice of gold, she will
yet go to ruin if we can train her not.’

‘It was a pity she left her broom.’

‘Ach, Gretchen, what for you say that

now? We cannot let her go; we must be ever *mit* her.'

'It seems she is no longer with us—she has been out since ten o'clock this morning. The question is, will she ever come back?'

'Where should the child stay? Ah, her voice, her beautiful voice, is it to be lost?'

Thus it will be seen that Deb was not altogether as amenable to authority as in the earlier days of her sojourn in the Art School; the vagrant instinct, which would never be thoroughly eradicated, was so strong upon her at times that she was compelled to throw off the shackles of decorum and submission. It was not that there was any real harm in the girl, but it was part of her nature to be wild and free and outspoken, and moral training would never wholly change her.

Minna, who had the greatest influence

over Deb, had gone to Germany, and stéady-going Gretchen, in failing to comprehend the girl's erratic, volatile character, contrived not unfrequently to bring about the very mischief she would have given much to avert; for when she pulled the cord of propriety too closely Deb would manage to cut it, and, rushing off once more into the London streets, which had been her home so long, would try and forget that she had got 'to be made prim and polite.'

Whither she went no one knew, for on her return from these adventures she would answer no questions, save to express her regret that she had been naughty.

Gretchen's patience was wellnigh worn out, and she at last resolved to appeal to her father for assistance and advice, though she felt it would be with little result—the girl's wonderful voice would in his eyes eclipse all

her irregularities of conduct. To-day she has been gone much longer than usual, and they are almost beginning to imagine she will return no more, when, like a meteor, she flashes into the room—not subdued and regretful, as is usual after one of her secret outings, but with flushed cheeks and beaming eyes, in the full zenith of her beauty.

‘*Grosser Himmel*,’ cries the German, ‘*was ist es denn mit* you, Deb, that like a mad maiden you fly thus through the streets?’

‘Oh, Papa Wurzel, I have seen the beautiful young lady again, and I thought she had forgotten me altogether.’

‘*Was für*, young lady? What do you talk of, child?’

‘She as was here the night of the concert. She was driving in ever so swell a carriage with that there melancholy man,

and she stopped and spoke to me. "Little Deb," says she, ever so sweetly, "ask Herr Wurzel to let you come to-morrow and spend the whole day." And you will let me go, won't you, Papa Wurzel? It will be so nice.'

'You have bespattered all your tidy frock with mud, and torn it out of the gathers. Really, Deb, you are too bad. And to talk of going into a lady's house! Why, it is quite impossible. Where have you been all these hours?' Of course they were Gretchen's warning tones, and the tears rose into Deb's eyes.

'*Lass sein, lass sein, mein kind,*' said the soft-hearted old German; then, turning to Deb—

'So you have met the lady, little one, and she will you have to see her. I will not my refusal make.'

‘Oh, thank you, Papa Wurzel, thank you.’

‘Stay, stay, listen. You must with my Gretchen go, make tidy your clothes, and give me one great strong promise that for a whole month from this day you will go no more alone into the street.’

‘With all my heart I make the promise.’

‘Only for a month,’ put in Gretchen.

‘By little bits and little bits we make great works, my Gretchen. The child, *kleine Zigeunerinn* that she is, will be *mit* us at the end.’

Deb threw herself on the top of the somewhat frail old man and hugged him; then she kissed Gretchen, and began to caper about the room, singing at the top of her musical voice till the tears coursed each other down the old German’s face for

the very love of the sweet sound ; and Gretchen finally carried the girl off to be 'tidied up' and made presentable for the morrow's holiday ; 'though whatever her ladyship would think of Deb's bad grammar and slipslop English,' was a puzzle to good Gretchen, who had herself set to work to learn the language of her new country by the strictest grammatical rules. Notwithstanding Deb's spoiled untidy clothes, Gretchen's resources under difficulties were by no means limited, and she was started off in the morning to Lady Fleming's looking clean and neat, her beauty enhanced by the very quaintness of the attire in which prim Gretchen dressed all the little pupils. This somewhat unusual invitation had created quite an excitement in the school-house ; and perhaps not a little jealousy had been awakened in the hearts of some of the other

children, who could not help recognising the fact that their worldly position was an improvement on Deb's ; but the Meister had called them to class, and Fraulein Gretchen had gone about her daily housewifely duties—surely tranquillity and order would once more reign in the little establishment which had known no irregularity or discord till Deb came. For an hour or two the musical instructions and the household affairs went on smoothly, then there was a ring at the bell, a chattering in the passage, and Gretchen, putting her head into the class-room, told the Meister he was wanted.

In the little front parlour, where visitors were received, sat a lady.

She rose as Herr Wurzel entered, and he in turn took off his velvet skull-cap, which was removed only on rare occasions.

‘You have a school here, I understand, for music.’

‘*Ja*, madame ; I train for the love of the great art young voices to make melody. Has madame a young sister who will add lustre to the work?’

‘Alas, no,’ said the lady, catching at once the spirit of the old man’s fancy. ‘On my wasted life no such joys as art alone can bring have ever descended. I have come to see you to-day at the request of a mutual friend whom I saw but a few days ago in Paris—M. Barbier.’

The German’s eyes twinkled at the sound of M. Barbier’s name ; and even Gretchen, who during the first part of Mrs. Fitzalan’s speech had been rather inclined to vote her a humbug, assumed a much more pleased and genial expression of countenance.

‘Ah, M. Barbier, he was a good friend to me when in the great world of Paris I was suffering destitution for my art’s sake. He loves the great melodies, M. Barbier; and his violin, does he play it now?’

‘I daresay,’ answered Mrs. Fitzalan, who was totally ignorant on the subject of M. Barbier’s musical proclivities. ‘I have a note from him which will explain the object of my visit.’

After carefully reading the missive Wurzel passed it to his daughter.

‘Here, in this poor house, to receive madame! But we would not dare.’

‘Ah, Herr Wurzel, you do not know how simple my tastes are. All I ask is a quiet bedroom, where I can be at peace when the turmoil of some business which has brought me to England allows me a little time for repose.’

‘There is a bedroom the lady can have, father, if she thinks it good enough for her,’ said Gretchen, who perhaps saw a means of increasing the contents of her slender purse if this stranger, who came with so good an introduction as that of M. Barbier, were admitted as an inmate.

‘Can I see it?’ asked Mrs. Fitzalan.

‘With pleasure.’ So she accompanied the good Gretchen upstairs, and was shown into a tidy but scantily-furnished room on the second floor.

‘Shall I not die of horror in this abominable garret?’ was her mental question, while aloud she expressed her perfect satisfaction, and entered into momentary details with a preciseness and a generosity which completely won the heart of the thrifty Gretchen. ‘She would dine with the family, of course. How charming! So all the dear

children sang. Delightful ! M. Barbier must have intended it for a surprise, as he had not told her of half the pleasures Herr Wurzel's house contained. Might she too be allowed to soothe her weary hours by hearing a little music ? Ah, yes ; she would fetch her luggage from the hotel where she had passed the night, and towards evening she would be quite installed.'

'The child who like an angel sings is out for a holiday,' said the German, who was thoroughly fascinated by Mrs. Fitzalan's amiable manners. 'To-morrow you will hear her. Ach Gott, she will be a great singer.'

'So you give your pupils holidays. How good of you, Herr Wurzel.'

'Poor *kinder*, poor *kinder*, they have few friends ; to most of them Gretchen and I are their only ones ; but this wild Deb, with her singing, her eyes, and her variableness, has

charmed a great lady—how calls she, Gretchen ? ’

‘ Lady Fleming, father.’

Mrs. Fitzalan gave a start, but it was only momentary. He did not remark it, and went on—

‘ She send for the child to help please and pass her idle hours for her.’

‘ Does she often come here, this lady ? ’ asked Mrs. Fitzalan.

‘ *Ach nein*, she comes not, only once a year at the *fête*—that was six weeks gone when she heard Deb sing.’

And the German and Gretchen prattled on of the children, the household arrangements, &c., &c. ; but Mrs. Fitzalan became suddenly quiet and as it seemed uninterested. Truth to relate, she was thinking over the probable complications which might arise from her temporary residence under Herr

Wurzel's roof. Yes, she would chance it. The information might be more easily obtained, the machinery more readily worked, if she could succeed in charming into her service this girl they called Deb. At all events she would stay for a day or two and make the acquaintance of the girl. So she brought herself back to the level of Gretchen's conversation, and asked all sorts of questions relative to Deb with the interest of one who loves good Samaritanism for its own sake and rejoices in witnessing acts of self-advancement. Interspersed with this more practical talk, she knew how to win the old man by an occasional little sentence showing how she entered *con amore* into his love for 'his dear art.' For which in parenthesis it may be remarked that Mrs. Fitzalan cared nothing, and of which she knew naught. She had lived long enough in the world with

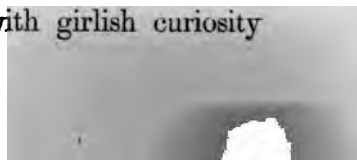
her ears open to have a smattering knowledge on most subjects. She knew that Mozart, Weber, Meyerbeer were musicians, though what their respective compositions were it would have puzzled her to tell. She knew, too, that Wagner was the apostle of the new school of so-called 'music of the future,' but in what the difference consisted between his views of the subject and those of his predecessors she had not the faintest notion. Never mind, she had only to suggest the heads to old Wurzel, and he filled in at once the long chapters of information in which Mrs. Fitzalan failed, and he liked her all the better for the opportunity afforded for talking on his pet theme and airing some of his craziest theories. Altogether Mrs. Fitzalan's introduction to the Wurzels was a success, and nearly two hours had elapsed before she left them to go in search of her

baggage, and then she with difficulty prevented Gretchen from accompanying her who would so gladly 'have spared the lady the trouble of moving her boxes herself.' This would, however, in nowise suit Mrs. Fitzalan's plans. In the few hours which remained of the day she had much to arrange, in the carrying out of which Gretchen's presence would be seriously detrimental. No letters could reach her save from M. Barbier, who would forward all missives from Paris and alone knew her English address. She must write to him at once, and beg him to suppress for the present the name of Fitzalan entirely. 'Madame Alan—the widow of a Frenchman—yes, that would do, and save a number of inquisitive questions. If Deb chattered, as girls always do, Cicely would never trace under that name and description her old friend of the Champs

Elysées.' Then her boxes had to be unpacked and a few things suitable for her new life taken in a small trunk marked 'Madame Alan ;' in fact, a good deal of time was spent before she thoroughly got rid of her prefix and was prepared to plunge into this fresh complication—the excitement attendant on which had a degree of charm for Mrs. Fitzalan which soothed her ruffled spirits and was altogether far more in accordance with the usual state of her temperament than that wild mountain expedition on which, in a moment of temporary insanity, she had so madly started. It was the middle of July, and London, though hot and dusty, was still tolerably crowded. The Session was not over, and Goodwood had not yet taken the *beau monde* down to the sunny South coast ; Mrs. Fitzalan as she lumbered along in her four-wheeler, with her modest luggage on the

top, saw more than one familiar face pass by her in a dainty carriage, and only pulled down a thick grey travelling veil she still wore just in time to avoid actual recognition from Algy Duncombe, who was waiting to cross a street till her vehicle should have passed. Yes, it was well she had selected quarters in a remote street ; she must acquire too the art of changing her appearance somewhat. So she rumbled up to the door of the Art School just as Sir Hubert Fleming's carriage set down Deb. Happily the veil still concealed her features, for Cicely and Sir Hubert, on their way to a London dinner party, were the other occupants of the carriage.

Madame Alan, as she now called herself, having dismissed her cab, and the door being shut, next directed her attention to a general survey of Deb, who with girlish curiosity



was lingering in the passage and wondering what this new arrival meant. She had taken off her bonnet and in her usual careless way thrown it on a table, and her lovely face and glorious eyes, with their silken fringes, made an impression on Mrs. Fitzalan which was almost a sad one.

‘Another victim,’ she murmured to herself. ‘God! why is beauty given to women?’ Deb meanwhile looked keenly at her and made her mental comments perhaps as shrewdly.

‘Seen a bit of wear and tear, poor thing. She ain’t bad-looking though; but she won’t do after her ladyship.’

First impressions on both sides having shaped themselves into an idea, words followed.

‘Will you take this bag upstairs for me,

if you please, Deb? I think that is your name.'

'That I will, and the box too, if you like,' cried Deb, always ready to be actively employed. Helping in the transport of the luggage they made acquaintance, and before half an hour was over Mrs. Fitzalan had heard enough of Cicely's home life to discover that the letters breathing of content and happiness did not contain all the truth, and that Deb, with her native acuteness, had marked the undercurrent which lay beneath the smooth surface, and which Cicely sought so vainly to conceal. Of course Deb's information would have been useless to anyone unpossessed of a key; but 'she ain't a bit like a young thing—just sits as though she hadn't got no starch in her—limp like. But ain't she pretty, and ain't she quiet and good!'

Ay, full well Mrs. Fitzalan understood the symptoms, though passive inertness would scarcely have characterised her own passage through a similar phase.

‘A little coffee upstairs—yes, that will be delightful. How thoughtful of Miss Gretchen!’ And the coffee having made its appearance, and Deb having gone off to have her supper with the others, Mrs. Fitzalan is at last alone. She looks round the forlorn barrack of a room, in such striking contrast to her snug Parisian quarters, and laughs cynically.

‘*Dieu*, what a fool I am!’ she says as she catches sight of her features in a looking-glass from which the quicksilver is rubbed off in patches. ‘Why have I come here, instead of passively waiting the issue of events in my own house? Is it the spirit of Bohemianism that is alive within me, or’—

and a dark look of hatred glared in her eyes—‘is it the fiercer and more untameable spirit of revenge?’

And as she lay back in the rickety arm-chair which, being the only one in the house except her father’s, Gretchen had put into the lady’s room, the shadows gathered deeper and deeper about her brow, till you almost fancied you could see the evil angels fluttering with their dark wings and glaring with their savagely demoniac faces, and you turned away sick and horror-stricken, as if a glimpse into Gehenna had suddenly revealed itself in the twilight.

CHAPTER XII.

CONFIDANTE AND COUNSELLOR.

Two men are standing together in a club-window in St. James' Street, talking in low, almost whispered tones. They are Sir Hubert Fleming and Harry Durant. Clouds seem to have settled themselves somewhat thickly on Sir Hubert's brow, and his usually melancholy countenance looks sallow and ghastly in the strong light; while Durant's bright face is ruffled and the flush of annoyance sits angrily upon it. Can aught have gone wrong with Cicely? for it is evident that it is no mere passing worry they are discussing so intently.

‘ If I had only known, I would have cut off my right hand before I had dragged her into this,’ Sir Hubert is saying.

‘ Ah, if it had only not been done quite so hastily,’ answered Durant.

‘ That was Mrs. Fitzalan’s fault, not mine. “ If a marriage is to take place let us have it at once,” was her constant cry; and nothing loth, I followed her suggestion, without inquiring as carefully into details as I should have done.’

‘ D—— her!’ ejaculated Mr. Durant, fiercely. The baronet looked surprised at a violence which he did not think the circumstances of the case warranted.

‘ Have you, then, such grave fears for the future of my wife?’ he asked.

Durant coloured up as he saw the slip he had made.

‘ Of Lady Fleming’s future I was not

thinking at that moment, but of sundry private grudges I personally owe Mrs. Fitzalan. But never mind her just now. This lawsuit is really to be instituted against you, you say?’

‘I have just received a letter from my lawyer notifying the fact.’

‘How long has your late wife been dead?’

‘Ten years.’

‘And how long have you been trustee to this property?’

‘Well, some fifteen or sixteen years, I should imagine. My wife’s sister married about a year after we did, and, like a fool, I consented to be a trustee under the settlement, without inquiring sufficiently into the character for rectitude borne by my co-adjutor.’

‘And do you positively mean to say that

he has dissipated the whole fortune of your two nieces, and that they are coming on you to make it good? By Jove, Fleming, but this is a serious matter.'

'Serious is not a strong enough word, my dear Durant—it is absolute ruin. Poor Cicely!'

'I'd fight it to the last' cried Harry Durant. 'The man must have some property that one can pounce upon.'

'Not a stiver left, they say.'

'You must not believe all you hear. At all events let us get hold of a sharp lawyer and see if he cannot make something out of it.'

'With all my heart; but I am afraid it is only throwing good money after bad. I shall have to retrench frightfully; in fact when this is paid I shall be a pauper. And I who had hoped to do so much for Cicely!'

‘Keep a good heart, old fellow—you may pull through yet. Never say die at the very beginning.’

‘Ah, I have not got your easy-going temperament, my dear Durant. I often think it was both wrong and selfish in me to link that young life to my gloomy existence, especially as I notice she droops at times under the melancholy I cannot wholly throw off. And now this fresh trouble—oh, what a miserable fool I have been!’


‘You have got an extra fit of the blues this morning, my dear fellow,’ said Mr. Durant hurriedly, writhing in mental torture the while as he was compelled to listen to Sir Hubert’s confidences. ‘They will not mend matters. Let us do something practical, for goodness sake. To see a lawyer at once is surely the wisest course.’

‘I feel perfectly powerless and dejected,’

replied Sir Hubert, 'and trust entirely to your friendship for assistance. Poor Cicely! I shall never dare tell her that ruin stares her in the face. Will you, as an old friend, tell her what has happened, Durant?'

'I! Fleming, are you mad?' And for a moment Harry Durant looked at him aghast; then he laughed noisily and excitedly. 'Wait till ruin comes—that will be quite soon enough to make Lady Fleming acquainted with the fact. Come, old fellow, let us go out; we are calling forth observation by this private talk—we can chat much more freely in the street.'

So arm in arm they sauntered forth together, Fleming relieving his overburdened mind by discussing the ins and outs of this impending lawsuit, and receiving good counsel from the man he had selected as his adviser, and whose practical knowledge of



the workings of life was seldom at fault. As long as he kept strictly to business details Durant was all attention and ready to exert himself to the utmost, but when he strayed from the point at issue and discussed these untoward circumstances as they would affect Cicely he little knew the purgatory through which he forced his friend, or how bitterly that friend regretted that he had thought fit to select him from among the number of acquaintances he had in London to fill the part of confidante and counsellor. Should he go off abroad and leave Fleming to struggle with the lawyers as best he could? Nay, that would be in direct contradiction to all the laws of loyalty and good faith. A man surrounded by difficulties and possessing by no means a clear head for business matters had applied to him for help, and to go away and leave him in the hands of the

Philistines was an act of cowardice of which Harry Durant under no circumstances would permit himself to be guilty. Cicely's husband, too!—the thing was impossible—he would keep as clear as he consistently could of the villa at Campden Hill, but as far as devoting all his mental faculties to Sir Hubert's cause in London was concerned, why, of course they were thoroughly and unreservedly at his service till the work was done. Such were some of Mr. Durant's thoughts as, having parted from Sir Hubert after an interview with a lawyer, who by no means smiled on Sir Hubert's chances in the case, he walked meditatively back from the pur-lieus of Lincoln's Inn in the direction of the Park, which was still full of loungers not yet returned to their homes for a late lunch. The Bertrands, with Mr. Seton in attendance, were among the first people he met; and

although his dear aunt did not smile as graciously on him as she had once done, yet she always received him with a certain amount of effusion, and on this occasion seemed more than usually anxious to keep him by her side—more, perhaps, with the object of learning a few details which Durant alone could furnish, if he chose, than from any idea of retaining him as a ‘dangler.’

Rose was laughing gaily with Mr. Seton; May, rather preoccupied, was looking vainly round in search of Algy, who did not happen to be in the Park on that especial morning; but they both received Harry Durant cordially enough.

‘You will be going down to Swinton soon, I suppose?’ he was saying to his aunt.

‘Yes, very soon now. May we hope to see you there?’

‘Well, it is not unlikely I might run down for a day or two. I rather want to have a talk with Burke.’

‘Only a day or two? Oh, Cousin Harry!’

‘Well, Rose, it isn’t civil, is it?—only, you see, I have some rather pressing business which probably will keep me in town for some time.’

‘You always have mysterious business, Harry. I should have thought country air would do you good. You have not looked well since your accident.’

‘No, it shook me more than a broken leg ought to have affected a strong man. The doctors say they do not understand it.’

‘Women sometimes are wiser than doctors, Harry—you should settle down quietly and marry. The vagrant life you lead is enough to make anyone look ill.’

‘I assure you I am as steady as old

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1. The first of these is the fact that the Commission has not yet received any information from the Government of the United States regarding the results of its investigation of the activities of the American Friends Service Committee in the Philippines.

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1. *Chlorophyll *a** and *Chlorophyll *b** were determined by the method of Arar and Collins (1971).

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‘That is surely for her consideration when she receives your invitation—you and I can scarcely analyse Lady Fleming’s opinion on the subject, can we, aunt?’

‘*I* cannot; but *you*, as her most intimate friend, are quite different,’ replied Mrs. Bertrand, a little pointedly.

He did not contradict her—somehow he felt a contention on the subject would only open the door to farther remarks—but said gaily—

‘I should think it would be rather fun for her to go back among her old friends as a big swell.’

‘You will come and meet them, Harry, of course, if I do persuade your uncle to ask them?’

‘Very doubtful—I shall probably be abroad before the autumn.’

‘Paris again! Why, you and Mrs. Fitzalan seem quite inseparable.’

Mr. Durant’s brow lowered, and he was about to answer angrily; but discretion triumphed, and he said, with a forced laugh—

‘How I should be envied by other men if I possessed but half the intimate acquaintances among the ladies that you ascribe to me, *ma tante!*’

‘Well, I don’t approve of your Mrs. Fitzalan,’ she answered. ‘I have a great idea that she is an adventuress.’

‘*Qui sait?*’ he said, quietly, shrugging his shoulders. ‘I assure you it is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me who she is. If she does not choose to air her pedigree *pro bono publico*, why should we inquire into it?’

‘So like a man!’ cried Mrs. Bertrand. ‘But if we did not weed out the tares which

will get into society, why, they would soon have the preponderance.'

'Well, if the pruning-hook were put into my hands,' said Harry, laughing, 'I should begin with the stinging-nettles. But then, as you justly observe, I am a man.'

Mrs. Bertrand looked annoyed. Somehow she always contrived to get the worst of it when she entered the lists to tilt with her nephew.

He was enjoying his little triumph secretly, when on a sudden May exclaimed—

'Why, what a sensation there is down there! Something must have happened—I hope it is not an accident.'

Seton and Durant started off at once, leaving the ladies still seated under the trees. The horse in a victoria had taken fright at a child's ball, which had been carelessly thrown across the road in front of it. It

was plunging and rearing frightfully, while people were running hither and thither in a state of dire consternation. A lady was sitting in the little open carriage, which was in imminent danger of being momentarily kicked to atoms. She did not attempt to throw herself out, but clung pertinaciously to the side of the victoria, her lips tight-set, her eyes closed, as pale as death.

‘My God!’ was Harry Durant’s ejaculation as he saw her; and pushing through the gathering crowd with an impetuosity which might have been resented under less excitement, he gained the side of the carriage. He was only just in time—another plunge from the frightened animal and the coachman was off the box. Several gentlemen surrounded the horse and succeeded in calming it to a certain degree.

‘The lady has fainted—how will she be

got out?' said a voice in the crowd. Another moment and Harry Durant's arm was round her.

'Cicely—my darling Cicely!' he whispered as he lifted her from her perilous position.

She opened her eyes and looked at him as she had done long ago in the Vicarage on the night of Peter's death; then she closed them again, and lay there passively, as though content to be borne away by him into infinity.

Ladies, however, came forward with smelling-bottles, fans, and endless suggestions. Good officious people, they little knew how miserable was the awakening they were so anxious to effect, what happiness was that death in life which had come over her as she lay safe in his strong arms. If he could only have carried her right away,

he thought !—but the place was public, and the conventionalities must be respected for her sake ; so he drew back to a little distance and let the women-folk potter round her with their eau de Cologne and their kindly regrets, while he, leaning against a tree close by, watched the scene in silence. She was brought back to consciousness at last ; and looking round wildly, as though in search of some one, murmured—

‘ Where is he ? Is it all a dream ? ’

In a moment Harry Durant was by her side.

‘ The coachman has been picked up, and the horse is quiet, Lady Fleming. I am so sorry you have been frightened.’

‘ Thank you,’ she said, quietly, as though searching in the memory which had not wholly come back to her for a knowledge of what had really occurred. With a sudden

rush the whole truth seemed to come upon her, though the people, the Park, the accident were forgotten.

‘Take me back to Swinton at once,’ she said, with a little hysterical cry.

Harry Durant looked helplessly round. What should he, what could he do? There was not one among all that crowd of human beings that he could trust to go with Cicely in her present unhinged state.

‘Shall I get a cab and take you home, Lady Fleming? I am afraid the carriage is seriously damaged.’

‘Do what you like,’ was Cicely’s answer. ‘You always do the best.’

‘Was this the best, that he should accompany her alone to Campden Hill? Ay, anything to escape from the observation of all these people.’ But still he hesitated.

‘Why, Cis, what is this I hear? You have been upset and frightened to death.’

‘Ah, Lady Susan Verulam—take her home, Lady Susan, take her home, and be tender with her. She has had an awful shock.’

‘Bless the man! why, he is as white as Cicely. Take her home—of course I will; only I have no carriage here, and I am sure she cannot walk.’

Numerous offers to lend carriages were at once tendered; and one of them being accepted, Mr. Durant gave Cicely his arm to support her still tottering footsteps.

‘For mercy’s sake be careful. We have both been mad to-day,’ he whispered as he led her along.

She did not answer save to cling more tightly to his arm.

Three minutes more and she was driving

passively, her head on Lady Susan's kindly shoulder, *en route* to her home; while Harry Durant stood, with blanched cheeks and furrowed brow, watching the carriage till it was out of sight; then he bethought himself that the public eye was still upon him, and with a strong effort he conquered himself, gave prompt and practical orders about the carriage and the horse; talked the accident over with some of the idlers who still lingered on the scene; took especial care to go and give the Bertrands all the information for which he knew they were craving; then saying he would see if he could find Fleming at the club, strode off from a scene where during the last half-hour so important a life-episode had been enacted.

Yes—he must avoid that Campden Hill Villa. Of course he must go to-morrow and

inquire how Lady Fleming was after her accident, then for weeks, months, it should not see his face, even if he went to the other end of the earth to avoid it. Thank God Lady Susan had arrived so opportunely. So far things were all right—no one knew aught save that Cicely was sorely frightened. In future it should be his foremost thought to guard her honour and his own.

CHAPTER XIII.

KIND INQUIRIES.

THE day following the accident to Lady Fleming's carriage in the Park her door is beset by inquirers after her health, for the news of what had happened has spread like wildfire through fashionable London; and many people who have not yet left cards on the young bride take this opportunity of commencing an acquaintance. Amongst those who found their way to Campden Hill, rather late in the afternoon, was Harry Durant. He would just ask at the door how she was—it was scarcely likely after

yesterday's shock that she would care to see him so soon.

'Her ladyship was pretty well—only rather nervous,' answered the servant who had been Sir Hubert's confidential attendant for years. 'But would not Mr. Durant walk in? The orders were that if he called Sir Hubert particularly wished to see him.' Thus solicited, what excuse could Harry Durant offer? though he felt considerably relieved at being shown at once into Sir Hubert's private study, yet 'conscience makes cowards of us all,' and Mr. Durant's conscience did not feel absolutely clear. What could the baronet want with him? Ah! after all it was probably only some more particulars about the impending lawsuit that he had to discuss.

Sir Hubert sat by the table writing, looking gloomier, more melancholy, if it

were possible, than he had done before his marriage. Preoccupation about the business matters which hung over him, and of which he cared not to utter a word to his wife, sat heavily upon him, though the good man imagined that he showed no sign of trouble. Near the window, lounging on a tiny sofa with an open book in her lap, was Cicely. Sir Hubert started up when he saw his friend, the man on whom he had elected to lean for advice and help, and to whom he had now become doubly indebted for the new service he had rendered him. With an unusual amount of demonstration and a warmth of feeling of which most people would have believed him totally incapable he received Mr. Durant; and it was well, for, taken up with his own thanks, he noted neither the changing colour with which Mr. Durant suffered his expressions of gratitude

nor the death-like pallor which had spread itself over Cicely's face when she beheld him.

‘It is a nasty horse that; I should get rid of it if I were you, Fleming. Not vicious, perhaps, but easily frightened—quite as great a fault in a lady's carriage. Ah, Lady Fleming, I hope you are all right again to-day. It was nervous work yesterday, was it not? So lucky Lady Susan put in an appearance just at that moment.’

And Harry Durant was very offhand, trying to hide the excitement under which he was labouring by pleasant rattle.

‘So lucky *you* put in an appearance, you mean,’ said Sir Hubert. ‘Susan would not have been of much use. It was she who told me how you saved Cicely's life; for, as for the little woman herself, I don't believe she knows what did happen.’

The faintest pink tinge spread over her face as she said, in a low tone—

‘Oh, yes, I know it all—very well.’

She did not attempt to thank Mr. Durant, but lay there very passively, listening while he and her husband talked. She seemed thoroughly prostrate and exhausted, as though she had neither the desire nor the energy to move.

‘Nervous prostration from a sudden fright,’ the doctor said, who had seen her that morning. ‘A little quiet and it would pass.’ This report satisfied Sir Hubert; but while Harry Durant talked his eyes rested lingeringly on Cicely. As she lay back there with closed lids probably she felt their gaze though she saw it not; and as he looked at her he perhaps read the signs more truly than the doctor had done—man of physic though he was. But then Harry Durant

had known her when she was a village-girl, scarcely a year ago ; he had marked the quick phases of change through which she had passed, and yet he could scarcely believe that this pale, tranquil Lady Fleming was little Cis, the merriest spirit on Swinton Green.

‘ Was it her heart or her spirit which was broken, and how large a share had Mrs. Fitzalan had in the wretched work ? ’

Man-like, he did not ask himself whether he were in any way to blame, did not choose to remember how he had influenced Cicely’s destinies ; he only cursed the woman whom he believed to be the instrument who had worked failure both for Cicely and himself. Had she come across his path at that moment it is more than probable her downfall would have been accomplished with one blow. Harry Durant had only forborne to

strike because the nobility of nature that was in him taught him that it was cowardice to crush a woman, even though that woman were his deadliest foe.

But none of these thoughts did he allow to transpire through that easy flow of talk for which he was renowned. He cracked little jokes with Sir Hubert, chaffed him about his taste in furniture and his art-proclivities with all the familiarity of established friendship.

‘Talking of art, we have had that wonderful singing girl of old Wurzel’s here once or twice lately. Cis has taken quite a fancy to her,’ said Sir Hubert.

‘Little Deb—ah, she is an oddity. She used to sweep the crossing close to my diggings. I often threw her a coin.’

‘Oh, she chaunts your praises ceaselessly,’ said Cicely, opening her eyes and smiling.

‘I am sure I don’t know why she should. I suppose I was not the only one who gave her money. What is Wurzel going to do with her? She has a fine voice—there is no mistake about that matter.’

‘Send her abroad later on, I believe, to study.’

‘Send her to the deuce! She’ll get into mischief abroad as sure as fate.’

‘Did I?’ asked Cicely, who had closed her eyes again, and did not open them this time.

‘You, Lady Fleming—do you compare yourself to Deb?’

‘I was as friendless and as homeless,’ she answered, softly.

Mr. Durant looked annoyed; but Sir Hubert spoke—

‘Cis is far too humble and too backward

in relying on her own powers and abilities. Don't you think so, Durant?'

She sprang up with a dash of her old fire.

'I have no powers, no abilities to rely on,' she said, laughing. 'I was miserable and forlorn enough when grandfather died. Only Mr. Durant befriended me.'

'To Burke, Lady Fleming, to Burke you are indebted for your education and your start in life—not to me.' And his tones were cold and measured.

Cicely looked at him in surprise; then she lay back on the sofa and closed her eyes once more; while an idea came into Sir Hubert's head that he would one day have a little conversation with Harry Durant anent these matters. At this moment a servant entered with a card for Sir Hubert.

'Confounded nuisance! Why do people

come on business at this hour of the day ? Show him into the dining-room ; I will be there directly.'

Mr. Durant rose to take his leave.

' No, no, Durant, stop and talk to Cis. I shall not be many minutes, and I shall very probably want to consult you. It is a man about that business we were discussing yesterday.'

Mr. Durant reseated himself, and, Sir Hubert having left the room, took up a book. There was an awkward pause, during which he seemed interested in turning over the leaves, while Cicely opened her eyes and watched him. At last she spoke.

' Have you heard anything of Mrs. Fitzalan lately ? ' she asked, more, perhaps, to break the horrible silence which oppressed her than from any real interest in the woman who she instinctively felt had marred her life.

‘No, not lately. She has left Paris, I believe,’ he answered, without looking up from his book.

‘Left Paris? How very odd!’ And again there was a silence till Mr. Durant asked—

‘Was she kind to you, Cis?’

The hot colour rushed over her face at the sound of the old familiar name—never used now in his newly-commenced intercourse with her.

‘Oh, yes, she was very kind to me—that is, she gave me heaps of beautiful things, took me everywhere, and was very nice and good-natured in her way of speaking to me.’

‘What more did you want?’ he asked, still pretending to be engrossed in his book.

‘Oh I don’t know. Outward symptoms are not always reality, are they, Mr. Durant?’

‘No, I suppose not—which means that

you do not think Mrs. Fitzalan is altogether real?’

‘I dare say she is as real as the most of us, but not as real as I fancied people to be —once.’

‘Heaven forbid that there should be many shams such as she is on the face of the earth.’

‘Then you do not believe in her?’

‘I? My God! there is no woman for whom I have a greater contempt.’

‘Strange,’ murmured Cicely, ‘that, hating each other as you do, you should have selected her as my guide and friend.’

He looked up from his book now straight at Cicely.

‘It was fate, not I, my child; circumstances, not my will, linked your destinies with those of Mrs. Fitzalan. Could I have done otherwise you should never even have

known that she exists. Would to heaven that you never had.'

Cicely did not answer him. Probably she echoed the latter part of the sentence, for she took to thinking, while he once more became absorbed in the book.

After awhile a sudden flush spread over her face, and she said, excitedly—

'Mr. Durant, I have wanted so much to ask you a question. What is my real name? Do you know?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because I was married as Fitzalan. Why should I be called Fitzalan?'

Three or four leaves were turned over with rapidity.

'What does it matter? You are Lady Fleming now.'

'I am being reminded of that every hour of the day—I don't want you to tell me,' she

answered, testily, as she got up from the sofa.

‘Being then so very certain of that fact, what can it matter about the past?’ And he laughed very discordantly. But Cicely was angry.

‘Oh, of course you only treat me as a child. I have been played at ball with ever since I left Swinton.’ And she began to walk about the room. ‘But I am a woman now, and I mean to act for myself. If I want to know things I intend to find them out and do as I like.’

Harry Durant looked at her seriously for a minute; then he said—

‘Probably you will think I have no right to place myself uninvited in the position of Mentor, yet I cannot resist repeating the advice I gave you once in Paris. Do not seek to unriddle the secrets of Mrs. Fitzalan’s

life—you will become acquainted with them quite soon enough. Be happy while you are young and bright. You have a good and honourable husband. I have known him for years most intimately, and know well how worthy he is of the love and regard of a pure and virtuous woman. Be the light of his home, my child, and do not seek to peer into the dark recesses of other people's lives.'

Cicely turned round in her walk and looked at him ; then she said, slowly—

'Tell me, Mr. Durant, if I had asked you in Paris, would you have advised me to marry Sir Hubert?'

Her eye was on him as she spoke. For a moment he flinched under its gaze ; then he answered, fervently—

'Ay would I, Cicely—with all my heart.'


God forgive him the lie, if it gave her strength to keep on in the straight path!

She continued her walk up to the window, and after a second or two began to laugh.

‘Isn’t it absurd of Sir Hubert keeping me boxed up here just because I had a minute’s fright in the Park yesterday? I wish Algy Duncombe had come to-day; he would have made him take me out. You are as stupid as Sir Hubert.’

‘Where would you like to go?’ And Harry Durant closed his book with a slam and jumped up. She was right: any amount of nonsense was better than the dangerous rocks about which they had been hovering of late.

‘Oh I don’t know—to the theatre or the Opera or somewhere—anything is better than being moped.’



‘We’ll see what can be done with Fleming when he returns—I daresay he only wants the suggestion. Have you been much to the Opera? Which Opera do you like best?’ And when, a few minutes later, Sir Hubert came into the room they were talking merry nothings with an amount of *abandon* which promised well for that future in which they both honestly hoped there would be no quicksands.

‘I have brought some visitors, Cis,’ said her husband as he entered, followed by Gretchen and Deb, who, having heard of the accident which had happened to Lady Fleming, had come to inquire after her. Deb coloured up when she saw Mr. Durant, and stood somewhat shyly at the door while Lady Fleming talked to Gretchen; but the exclamation, ‘Oh, you dear little thing, how good of how you to have come!’ restored

her self-possession ; and she went up to her new patroness, nor succeeded in avoiding the hearty hand-shake bestowed on her by Harry. Deb had a sort of vague idea that he was 'demeaning himself by shaking hands with the likes of her.'


'Now we will send for some tea, and you will stop and have a long chat' cried Cicely, who perhaps felt herself more at home with these people than with the grander acquaintance to which she had been introduced since she left Swinton ; though probably the old butler scarcely thought that these were the sort of folk who should have been received as boon companions by his master's wife. Cicely's cheery reception speedily put both Gretchen and Deb at their ease, and talk flowed more rapidly than it had been wont to do with Cicely of late. It was the very

incongruity about Deb which fascinated those who knew her, and Cicely no less than others.

Her genius for music, her lovely face, and her quaint ungrammatical lingo were in such direct contrast to each other that it was impossible not to be struck by the girl.

Sir Hubert and Mr. Durant were both more or less taken by her, and joined for awhile in the conversation at the tea-table; but after a time they dropped into a private discussion about the business matters which had called Sir Hubert from the room.

Meanwhile Mr. Durant had not forgotten Cicely's wishes, and managed incidentally to suggest that an Opera-box that evening was at their service if they liked to go. He regretted he had an engagement, or he



would have accompanied them with pleasure.

‘Durant tells me Bubb has orders to save us an Opera-box for to-night,’ said Sir Hubert. ‘Should you like to go, Cis?’

She looked at Mr. Durant for a moment, and answered, smiling—

‘Yes, if he will come too, and I may take Deb to hear the singing.’

This was rather more than Sir Hubert—cosmopolitan though he was—had bargained for. His intimates scarcely gave him credit for much pride, yet he did not look altogether kindly on the idea of his wife appearing in a public place with a girl of Deb’s appearance.

‘Impossible’ was just hovering on the tip of his tongue, when he noted the look of enthusiastic delight in Deb’s violet eyes, and his heart failed him. As for Harry Durant,

all the latent fun and merriment of his nature bubbled up, and he laughed more heartily than he had done since Cicely's marriage.

‘Then it is settled,’ cried Cicely. ‘I see it written on both your faces, and I am sure Fraulein Gretchen will not object.’

‘I shall be glad to do anything to please your ladyship,’ said Gretchen, meekly, ‘but I am afraid Deb will look out of place at the Opera. I went once with my father, and the smart dresses of the ladies so frightened me I could not listen to the music.’

‘Oh, if that is all,’ said Lady Fleming, ‘I will dress Deb up in some of my clothes. What fun it will be! Leave her with me till to-morrow—do, dear Fraulein Gretchen.’

Who could withstand Cicely's pleading?

Certainly Sir Hubert could not, and he joining in her request, Gretchen was perforce compelled to return to the school without her charge, feeling rather uncomfortable and out of place at being accompanied part of the way by Mr. Durant, who hurried off to secure the Opera-box, the mention of which had created such a revolution in the Flemings' calm household. Before he left the house he heard Cicely's and Deb's voices laughing gaily upstairs over the toilette they were improvising. Truly, he thought, all the childhood had not died out of Lady Fleming's life. There were yet merry days in store for her, and feeling this, he did not think it altogether necessary to forego the pleasure he would derive from looking into Lady Fleming's box at a late hour, to see how these young people were enjoying themselves. It never entered Mr.

Durant's masculine head to inquire how much of this sudden outburst of gaiety was from a sheer love of frolic, how much was from the over-acted desire to appear totally indifferent to a man who had told her in so many words that her marriage with Sir Hubert was the very thing he had most desired.

CHAPTER XIV.

EAVES-DROPPING.

‘OH, it was quite beautiful! Lor’ bless yer, nothing I ever heard tell of before could come up to that. There was dresses and lights and glitter, of course, but that was all nothing to the music. I just shut my eyes and thought, “Well, if heaven is anything like this ’ere, I wish I was there straight off.”’

And with a glib tongue Deb was narrating her operatic experiences to her young companions at the school-house, who had come crowding round her as soon as she returned from Campden Hill.

‘Your friend Lady Fleming must have been quite pleased at your delight,’ suggested Mrs. Fitzalan, who had joined the group of listeners to Deb’s rhapsodies.

‘Wasn’t she in spirits, just! I never thought she could wake up so lively. It is my belief it was all Mr. Durant, for they talked and laughed and joked together—it did one’s heart real good to hear them.’

‘Was Sir—what is his name?—the husband there?’ asked the fictitious Madame Alan.

‘Oh, yes, of course, but he sat mute in the corner and looked on quite pleased like, though. Whatever made that young thing marry the likes of him, I wonder? The other gentleman, Mr. Durant, would have been my fancy.’

‘Perhaps she did not know him before

she was married, or perhaps he does not care for her,' suggested Mrs. Fitzalan.

Deb began to laugh.

'I know a thing or two about that, I suspect,' she said. 'I ain't a fool at noticing —'cuteness is born in gutters, they say.'

'Cleverness in unravelling heart-histories is not usually found in gutters, though,' said Mrs. Fitzalan, laughing. 'How comes it that you know anything of the subject?'

'Most girls have eyes and feelins,' answered Deb. 'Not that I know anything by my own experience, though I daresay it will come—only, if ever I took a fancy to a gentleman, it would be to Mr. Durant.'

'After only one meeting to be so far gone as that! Really, Deb, I am surprised at you.' And Mrs. Fitzalan could not forego a smile as she thought of all the complications

in connection with Harry Durant, of which she believed Deb to be totally ignorant.

‘One meeting!’ cried Deb. ‘Bless you, madam, why, I have known the gentleman ever so long. He was a pertikler friend of mine before ever I saw the school.’

So, so; the revelations were becoming interesting, and Deb might be made even more useful than Mrs. Fitzalan had at first imagined.

‘If you were to become a great singer and marry Mr. Durant at the end, would it not be like a fairy tale? But still it might come about,’ she said, holding out the idea to the girl as a sort of bait to make her talk. ‘Come and tell me, child, where you first met this wonderful Mr. Durant.’

‘Oh, he don’t think of me—he is all for Lady Fleming, I tell you—not, for the matter of that, that I look forward to anything so

great as the likes of he.' And she followed Mrs. Fitzalan, who led her into the little front parlour away from the other listening scholars.

'So the Opera was charming? Tell me everything, Deb, from the very beginning ; I am so interested.'

Thus encouraged, Deb talked on rapidly and told Mrs. Fitzalan a good many things she was anxious to know about Cicely's home life ; though it was no slight trial of patience to be compelled to listen to the masses of irrelevant matter in which the information was wrapped. But Mrs. Fitzalan showed no outward signs of irritation. She was an adept in the art of cross-questioning without seeming desirous of gaining knowledge ; and Deb, loyal, true as steel as she would fain have been to both Cicely and Harry Durant, was plastic as wax in the hands of this clever

woman of the world, who had elected to patronise and flatter her. Yes, there was little doubt that Cicely and Harry Durant met on terms of warm intimacy. So far her scheme of vengeance was working ably : she had but to remain hidden a while longer in the German's house, with Deb for a scout to bring news from the enemy's camp, and the moment must soon arrive when she would be able to utilise her information for her own advantage. Poor little Deb ! she would have thrown herself from the nearest bridge into the river rather than have done the work chalked out for her, if she had only suspected the tool she was at the will of this able manipulator. As it was, however, she was let off more easily than Mrs. Fitzalan had intended, for the resistless fate which governs so many lives intervened and brought affairs to a crisis. An 'anti-

climax,' the Grey Widow would herself have called it, for events were by no means ripe enough as yet to please her insatiable longing for revenge and excitement.

The embodiment of fate's decrees in the present instance was none other than Algy Duncombe, against whom Mrs. Fitzalan stumbled one day soon after her conversation with Deb. She was wandering slowly along a street in by no means the most fashionable part of London. Fancying herself safe from recognition there, she had raised the grey veil she wore—for her eyes, she said—and, inhaling the soft summer air, was lost in a brown study as she sauntered on; nor did Algy's jovial tones recall her pleasurable from her dream as she heard them.

'Well met, Mrs. Fitzalan. All your friends have been wondering what could have

become of you ; but I never thought to come across you here.'

There was always a sort of impertinent swagger about Algy's manner to the widow which 'riled' her, the more especially as she could not fail to notice in how much it differed from that which he assumed to all the other ladies of his acquaintance.

'I scarcely knew that my movements were a matter of interest to Mr. Algy Duncombe,' she said, haughtily.

'Since Mrs. Fitzalan has closed her Paris doors Society's world has put on mourning. Why should I be excluded from the general lamentation?'

'Pooh ! don't talk nonsense. Why should not I come to London for a little change as well as other people?'

'Why not indeed?' But he looked round impertinently, with a gesture which

seemed to say that those out-of-the-way precincts were scarcely the fashionable widow's haunts.

She noted his meaning and coloured. Even Mrs. Fitzalan was not always on her guard.

‘I have a sick friend in these parts, and have been to see her.’

‘Ah, how good of you! But you were always good. And when is your more healthy acquaintance to have the privilege of your smiles? I dined with the Flemings last night, and strange to relate, we were all talking of you—wondering why you never wrote. I scarcely thought I should be the first to give news of the truant.’

‘I have been in London so short a time, and came at once on the duty which brought me to England. It is over now; my poor friend is dead, and I shall have leisure to

bestow my thoughts on those who are yet living.'

Algy Duncombe, unbeliever that he was, did not give the slightest credence to this story of a dying friend, but he tried to look regretful while he assured Mrs. Fitzalan that he would have the greatest pleasure in escorting her home.


'Pray don't let me take you out of your way, Mr. Duncombe. Women of my age and lone position are compelled at times to walk alone and find their way through life for themselves. I am going to Bond Street, to a shop. It is a long way from here.'

'A mile and a half at least; but, curiously enough, our roads lie together. I am bound for my club.'

Here was a fresh complication, and by no means an agreeable one. Mrs. Fitzalan was fully aware that Algy was a sifter. He

was not likely to let her off at all easily, and it would be utter destruction if he discovered that she was residing at the old German's.

‘*Que faire, mon Dieu, que faire?*’ was the one question she asked herself during their walk, listening to and answering meanwhile dreamily the thousand and one nothings, about which he rattled on, and which would certainly have interested her, bearing gossip relation as they did to the lives of many of her friends, if she had not been so terribly preoccupied. On a sudden, as though a fresh life had awakened in her, she began to talk as gaily as he did. She had decided on her plan of action. One of fortune's stakes for which she was so fond of throwing lay before her now. She reached the Bond Street shop, and went in to make her purchases. Algy Duncombe, as she felt sure would prove the case, still pertinaciously



at her elbow. She ordered her parcel to be sent to an hotel in Dover Street, and then, still accompanied by her shadow Algy, went there herself. It was the hotel at which she had arrived on reaching London, and where she had fortunately left a portion of her luggage, as being too ponderous to take to the old German's shabby quarters. Now she might surely dismiss her attendant squire. He could not dare to intrude upon her privacy without being invited.

‘Good morning, Mr. Duncombe. Thank you for your escort. I will not ask you to come in, as I am very tired. When you are passing pay me a visit.’

Yes, the fact of her being in London once known to Algy Duncombe, she could play the incognita no longer. She went upstairs, took at once the rooms she had previously had, sent for her boxes from the

storeroom, despatched a message to Gretchen saying the illness of a friend would call her away for a few days, and before night was thoroughly installed in her new abode. Sudden transitions were as life to Mrs. Fitzalan; they seemed to feed the latent excitement of which few, judging from her calm exterior, would have believed her nature to be capable. She put on one of her prettiest soft grey toilettes, and sat by the open window resting. The room she had selected for her sitting-room was a back one. She could think out her plans and shape her ideas more readily away from the fret and tear of the busy street.

But quietude did not altogether reign even here on that particular afternoon. A sound of music and of many voices fell on her ear. She rose and looked out of the window. In a house close by there were

assembled many guests, and a large morning party was in full swing. Mrs. Fitzalan stood out on the leads on to which the window opened. She could see everyone in the adjoining drawing-room, occasionally even hear the words they uttered. Hidden from view by the side of a projection in the wall, it amused her to watch these people, especially as every now and then a familiar form flitted by; and she was fitting in the various flirtations, watching the various phases of 'spooniness,' on the different faces with an interest she had never had time for at her own reunions, when suddenly a voice she knew full well said, hurriedly—

‘The reports are totally without foundation. My God! how fond people are of damning a fair fame!’

Harry Durant was standing on the balcony, not ten yards from Mrs. Fitzalan,

who drew her skirts more closely round her and remained motionless behind the projection.

‘You will forgive me for telling you this, Mr. Durant. The actors in a drama are sometimes the last to hear the criticisms. I am a straightforward, blunt woman, you know, and I have grown fond of the child.’

Mrs. Fitzalan did not know the speaker, but she strained her ears to catch Mr. Durant’s answer.

‘Forgive you ! I thank you with all my heart, and shall only too gladly follow your advice. Perhaps it were wisest if I went abroad at once.’

‘No,’ she replied, decisively, ‘live it down here. There can be no harm done if you are on your guard, for she, I feel sure, has no warmer feeling than regard for you.’

‘Thank God,’ he murmured.

‘What are you two concocting out there? Lady Susan, I have been looking for you everywhere.’ And Cicely, radiant in smiles, tripped out on to the pretty balcony and seated herself among the flowers. She had grown so cheerful and gay of late that Lady Susan must be forgiven the mistake she had just made in assuring Harry Durant there was no danger. When even he himself had been deceived by Cicely’s manner, why should another be wiser? They looked guilty, however, these two who had been talking together so intimately.

‘Well,’ went on Cicely, ‘tell me what it is you are arranging—a pleasant surprise of some sort for me, I hope, for I am horribly disgusted just at this moment. Fancy, Sir Hubert has actually gone to dine with some fusty old lawyer, down I don’t

know where!—says he must—it is a matter of business—and I am left all alone! Come, both of you, and dine with me—do.'

'Impossible; I have fifty engagements,' cried Lady Susan.

'And Mr. Durant has a hundred—he always has,' said Cicely, laughing. 'Well, never mind; I won't be moped. I'll go to the Art School and fetch Deb.'

'What an escape!' was the mental ejaculation behind the projection.

'Nonsense, Cis. You must give up philandering with Deb—it won't pay,' remarked Lady Sue. 'Ask Rose Bertrand to spend the evening with you. She is much more fit to be your companion.'

All the colour faded out of Cicely's face.

'Thank you, Lady Sue,' she said, quietly, 'I prefer choosing my own companions. I dare say I shall do very well with a book ;

or, if I am very much bored, I'll take a dose of chloral and go to bed.'

'A dose of chloral, Lady Fleming! Who has recommended such a thing?' exclaimed Harry Durant, aghast.

'Oh, Dr. James gave me some after that accident in the Park, to quiet my nerves, he said. You can't think how jolly it is. I have often taken it since.'

'Often taken it since? Why, it is only a week since the smash,' suggested Lady Sue.

'A good many things happen in a week, retorted her younger companion, laughing.' ' "A life may be made or marred in a few hours"—so I read in a book this morning. You see a week is an age.'

'You are growing very wise, Cis; too wise, I am afraid; but give up chloral, child, or the weeks of your life will merge into days.'

Cicely laughed.

‘I am sorry I interrupted your *tête-à-tête*,’ she said, ‘for you are both very disagreeable. As for Mr. Durant, I am sure he has eaten something which has disagreed with him, he looks so sour. I am going home. Ta-ta.’

‘Shall I see you to your carriage, Lady Fleming?’

‘If you like, and the whole thing does not bother you too much. You don’t seem capable of taking much trouble to-day.’

Another moment and they had all passed back into the room, and Mrs. Fitzalan was able to glide noiselessly from behind her projection.

‘So, so—Cicely had taken to acting; and neither Mr. Durant nor this new friend of hers saw anything in her manner beyond the mere effervescence and exuberance of

girlish spirits. It was well ; but how would it all end ? ’

Once more Mrs. Fitzalan sat down in her chair by the window and thought.

‘ This Lady Susan had deemed it necessary to warn him. Then Mr. Durant’s intimacy with Lady Fleming must be already becoming the subject of town talk. Ah ! she had gained much valuable information to-day. The meeting with Algy Duncombe was not altogether so ill-timed as she had thought.’ And before the sound of the music and the hum of voices had died away in the adjoining house, Mrs. Fitzalan had rattled the dice and prepared for the next throw. She was evidently in luck just now, and would have bet heavily on double sixes. Had she not watched Durant as Cicely sat among the flowers ? His nervous power was shaken, and his feeble efforts at casting for a

heavy stake would be wanting in the dash that luck demands.

Yes, this was the identical moment for action ; only she regretted she had not yet been successful in obtaining Miss Wilson's address. How could she for an instant have calculated on the fact of Deb's knowledge on the subject? Yet so it is in life—how near we are not unfrequently to a desired object even when we the least know aught of its proximity !

And Harry Durant conducted Cicely to her carriage, and saw her depart with a heavy heart, and a deeper furrow of care on the brow, which had grown wrinkled and aged of late ; while she waved him a gay farewell and looked as smiling and careless as a young thing should—till she was out of sight. Then she lay back in the corner of her brougham, utterly regardless of smash-

ing her gossamer bonnet, and, closing her eyes, sat motionless for awhile, till the tears slowly trickled down her cheeks. She did not seek to repress them ; they might help to remove the dreadful pressure which weighed upon her heart and tightened it as with a cord. It was well that Sir Hubert was out when she reached Campden Hill, or even he, blind though he was to exterior symptoms, must have noted the change. Not an hour ago the gayest of the gay, now she lay exhausted on the sofa in her bedroom. Pale and with tear-stained face, she gave herself up for awhile to the utter misery of despair.

‘She did not want any dinner—only to be left alone in quietude and darkness,’ she said—‘a most intolerable headache had come on,’ from the heat, she supposed.

So the maid gave her some strong tea and left her, according to her wishes, to

battle in solitude with those powerful feelings which would not be wholly crushed, though the recollection of that solemn promise to be 'faithful and true' never seemed to forsake her even for a moment.

CHAPTER XV.

‘FOR CICELY’S SAKE.’

BRUSHES here, mahl-sticks there, easels standing about, unfinished pictures and models everywhere—such is the aspect of Harry Durant’s *atelier*. Not at any time a tidy or over-careful man, his sanctum can never be designated as prim ; but now, from recent disuse, it has acquired a more than ordinary amount of dust, which rises like a mist and thickens the atmosphere, as, in a loose brown-holland blouse he has donned for the occasion, Mr. Durant begins kicking this thing out of his way in one

direction, throwing another there; in fact, with an amount of energy which betokens the storm raging within, he is preparing fiercely for active work. Virtuoso no longer, the artist must replace the town idler, and work, hard honest work, drive away the demon which has of late haunted his path. He will go to Campden Hill Villa no more, but, absorbed in the production of some great picture which shall bring him fame for aye, he will forget the very existence of Cicely, and set aside for ever the thousand worries and annoyances to which his acquaintance with her has given birth. It is a brave resolution, put into practice with an activity of purpose worthy of Harry Durant's honest loyal nature. 'True to the end' is the motto of his race, and he will not belie the traditions of his kith and kin. A short half-hour, and the studio has assumed

some appearance of readiness for future triumphs. But this canvas is too small, that is badly mounted; then the light is all wrong. Another half-hour passes in remedying these evils, when a still greater trouble arises—no congenial subject presents itself to his mind. A dozen sketches are looked over which on former occasions have been thought worth a consideration for development, but they are now thrown aside with something like an oath; and, taking up some crayons, with a sort of desperate dash Mr. Durant begins to work as though his life depended on rapid execution.

As the bold strokes assume form and life under the rapid touch of his pencil, you may well ask if it is for this he has forsworn the gay world and immured himself within the four walls of the large back room he calls an *atelier*. Cicely's face as he had

first seen it, with the long hair hanging carelessly about—the large sun-hat thrown back, lest its brim should conceal the lustre of her eyes—appears ere long in outline on the canvas, and, like a man in a dream, Harry Durant works on, as though by the touch of his genius he would fain perpetuate those features for all time. Morning has deepened into day, noontide waned into twilight, and still Harry Durant stands before his easel: but the gathering shadows at last remind him that he must rest from his labours, and he drops back at a little distance, as though to take in the effect of his work in its entirety while there is yet sufficient light in the sky.

A knock at the door almost startles him. It is the first sound from the outer world he has heard since he rose at daybreak with the sweeps. It may be a suffusion of blood

which mounts to his forehead, or it may be the last ray of light gleaming in at the large window which kindles the seeming glow, but, whatever the cause, Mr. Durant snatches the picture from its position and stands it with its face to the wall; then he opens the door.

‘A lady is asking for you, sir. She will take no denial; so I just showed her into the parlour,’ grumbled the landlady, who was a stickler for propriety and objected to lady-visitors.

‘What is her name?’ asked Mr. Durant.

‘Just as if I asked her! If you want to know you had best come and find out for yourself.’ And the old woman trotted off, muttering to herself about the lives some people lead.

‘Why, if there wasn’t the breakfast as had stood there the whole blessed day, and

not a sup or bite had the gentleman took !’

Mr. Durant passed his fingers through his hair and beard, and did not change the blouse which he knew was rather becoming than otherwise—vanity, it may thus be observed, was not wholly extinct within him—and then he passed on into his sitting-room, wondering to himself who this lady could be. She was dressed in black and closely veiled. He bowed stiffly and began a sort of formal ‘To what am I indebted ?’

She threw up her veil.

‘Mrs. Fitzalan !’

‘The last person you expected or wished to see,’ she said, sneeringly.

‘Certainly the last person I expected—here.’

‘Desperate cases require desperate ventures, Mr. Durant. You probably would

not have come to me had I sent for you.'

'To bring you to England it must indeed be a desperate case,' he said with a light laugh. 'In what can I assist you?'

Mrs. Fitzalan coloured angrily, for, woman though she was, she failed to detect the restless anxiety which lay beneath the carelessness of his tone.

'Are you so very safe and assured in all your enterprises that you have never any cause to fear?' she asked, mockingly.

'I scarcely know your meaning in the present instance. Certainly the good folks tell us we are all dependent on each other in this world. Am I to understand that Mrs. Fitzalan has come here to proffer help to me?' And he laughed.

'You are more in my power than you

think, Harry Durant. It were well, perhaps, not to push me too far.'

'My dear lady, I have left you in the most unreserved possession of your perfect freedom. For weeks past neither by sign nor sound have I allowed you to infer that I even live. The reason of this present complaint is a riddle to me.'

'Yet you hold proofs.'

He bowed.

'These proofs must be given up to me forthwith.'

'How so? The strongest proof I have against you is the word of a truthful man—if I choose to speak. Writing is easily burnt, but the tongue——'

'Must be silenced,' she said, peremptorily.

'*Must*? Since when has Mrs. Fitzalan learnt to be dictatorial?'

'Since Cicely married Sir Hubert Fleming and Mr. Durant was known to be her lover.'

'Woman, you lie!' he said, fiercely.
'How dare you twit me thus?'

It was Mrs. Fitzalan's turn to laugh.

'You did not think we were so nearly quits, Harry Durant. I daresay, after a little more haggling and a farther waste of words, we shall be able to square our accounts.'

He looked at her fiercely for a moment; then he said, bitterly—

'Heaven only knows how I despise you.'

'I am aware of it—fully aware of it, or I should not be here to-day.' And she gave him look for look. 'Yet what I am is your work.'

'My work? Come, this is past a joke.'

‘Listen to me, Harry Durant, for the last time, I hope, that we shall meet on earth. As a girl, years ago, before we either of us knew what intrigue meant, you loved me.’

‘It really is so long ago—don’t let us get into maudlin sentimentality, for heaven’s sake.’

‘Silence—do not interrupt me. You loved me then, or at all events, with man’s usual disregard for the feelings of others, you taught me to believe you did.’

‘I did love you, Margaret Denham ; should have loved you always, if——’

‘If I had not sacrificed too much for you,’ she said, promptly.

‘Nay, the sacrifice to which you allude rather strengthens than weakens the tie. I should never have been base enough to desert my love for you if you yourself had

not placed an insuperable barrier between us.’

‘And that barrier?’ she said, gasping almost for breath.

‘Was the man whose name you now bear.’

She clutched the back of a chair to save herself from falling, and stood looking at him for some seconds.

‘My God!’ she said at last, ‘this, then, is Thy punishment for sin! You, Harry, you thought and believed *that*—and I, who fancied that you knew the truth! Oh, Misery, I never thought to stare so closely in your face!’ And, her hand pressed on her heart, she rocked herself to and fro, but did not weep.

Mr. Durant walked away to the window. Like all men, he hated a scene, and he had no belief in Mrs. Fitzalan save as a consum-

mate actress. Finding, however, that she did not speak again, but only stood there as one who had lost her way in a vast wilderness, he went up to her and took her kindly by the hand as he said, almost tenderly, 'My dear Margaret, let bygones be bygones. What can it avail us, now we are both creeping into the "sere and yellow leaf" of life, to talk over our youthful loves? They can but call up bitter memories.'

'Our bygone youthful loves—would to God I had died when they did! And you, who thought me false, Harry, will you not believe me when I tell you that never for an hour have I been false to my old love for you—never will till the end comes?'

He shrugged his shoulders, unconvinced of her sincerity, notwithstanding her assurances, and perhaps scarcely caring whether she spoke the truth or not.

'I have never been in America,' he said, 'but I scarcely think that it is easier there to acquire a name and fortune than it would be here.'

'And Cicely,' she said, 'do you believe——'

'I do not wish to bring Lady Fleming into the discussion,' he answered, haughtily. 'Thank God she is provided for and happy.'

'Happy!'—and Mrs. Fitzalan's unnatural laugh echoed through the room—'happy! Will women ever be happy as long as there are men on earth? So Cicely's happiness is your chief care now?'

'You once promised that it should be yours. But really, Mrs. Fitzalan, it seems to me very unnecessary for us to discuss these matters.'

'They are the whole point of my visit here to-day. You thought I was in Paris,

where I probably should have remained quietly, if you had not crossed my path again and awakened old memories; but once roused, a jealous woman never rests. For the last three weeks I have been in London, dogging your steps. I am not ashamed to own it—you despise me already, you know. I have watched your ripening love for Cicely—saw you lift her from her carriage in the Park—heard of you by her side at the Opera—lingering about her home life—ay, Harry Durant, I know it all; yet you are counted by the world honest and upright and honourable in your dealings, and have Cicely's happiness and welfare ever before your mind.'

'Silence, woman; you have no right to tax my patience thus—beware lest you exhaust it.'

'Ah! did I not say we should cry quits.

at last? Give me the proofs you hold against me—swear that I shall pass the remainder of my life without a word being uttered by you which shall reveal to the world that I am other than I appear, or rest fully assured, Mr. Durant, that in that very hour I will sow dissension in Lady Fleming's home, by letting Sir Hubert know how matters stand between you.'

'Nonsense, nonsense, my good Margaret, you cannot do this—there is nothing to tell.' And he spoke hurriedly, though he sought to appear simply amused.

'Nothing to tell, Harry Durant? There is more to tell than you would care to have known, I fancy; and I repeat, leave me unmolested, or fear the consequences.'

'It scarcely seems to me that I have particularly interfered with you. Quietly absorbed as I have been for the last few

hours in my painting, I was not even thinking of you, much less harbouring the intention of making the story of your past life a public scandal.'

'Yet to accomplish your ends you have threatened me twice,' she answered. 'To serve mine I have come here now. Are these threats of yours to be put into execution, or will you accept the compromise?'

'If I had really wished to injure you I should have done so long ago. I understand nothing about a compromise,' he replied.

She laughed mockingly.

'Oh, pray do not commit yourself further in the papers you procured from Miss Wilson. And taking a letter from a box in the neighbourhood she hinted at

'You are not going to write that Miss Wilson? For I have seen that name in
~~the papers~~

She threw the light away with a jerk.

'So be it—for Cicely's sake they shall be kept. We float together on a rapid current, Lady Fleming and I; when I sink, strange that naught will save her!' And her laugh sounded so mockingly as it echoed through the room in the half-darkness, that it seemed as though a hundred little demons were let loose to torture and to harass.

Harry Durant was no coward, yet what could he do? Cicely's happiness, Cicely's reputation were in this woman's hands. He went to his desk without speaking and took out the papers, she watching him the while with those steel-grey eyes of hers which, like a cat's, saw clearest in the gloom.

'They are very safe in my possession,' he said, striving to appear perfectly calm and indifferent. 'I cannot imagine why you want to disturb them.'

‘They will be safer in mine,’ she answered, shortly, ‘and having them may prevent a tiresome pilgrimage to Campden Hill.’

He threw them to her with a sneer. In reality it mattered little to Harry Durant what the world thought or did not think of Mrs. Fitzalan, only Cicely must be sheltered, if possible, from evil tongues.

Once more she lighted a fusee, and as she watched the paper burn, her face as the light shone over it would have awakened Mr. Durant’s artistic spirit had his mind not been dwelling too deeply on other matters.

Once more the room was wrapped in darkness, and Mrs. Fitzalan spoke—

‘Now it is word for word, tongue for tongue, between us, Harry Durant. When you tell your tale mine will follow quickly.’

‘For mercy’s sake cease this nonsense,’ he said, irritably. ‘I wish to say nothing

whatever about you. Go back to Paris, and let us hear no more about the matter. Only remember Miss Wilson is still alive.'

'M. Barbier has undertaken to silence her. She, I imagine, will only prove a trifle costly ; but that is his affair.'

'M. Barbier—so he is still one of your friends?' said Mr. Durant, with a sneer.

'Say rather I am his slave. One false step sometimes leaves us for ever branded by the marks of the balustrades to which we have clung for help.'

'Just so. It is not always easy to recover your balance when once you have fallen.'

'For a woman it is impossible,' she said, bitterly ; 'to you men only is it permitted to make the laws and break them as you will.'

'Ah, well, under the new dispensation, when women's rights are established, we shall have to knock under,' he answered, lightly.

The tone angered her—she was in no mood for playful talk with him.

‘Good-night, Harry Durant,’ she said somewhat abruptly. ‘The chances are we shall meet no more on earth; the past between us has been too bitter to yield pleasure in the future—only, for Cicely’s sake, beware. Even without my interference that false step of which we spoke just now may be taken—that one step, you know, which brings inevitable ruin—to a woman!’

She was gone, without a handshake or a word from him, and yet in the ‘morning march of life’ these two had been what the world calls lovers.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

Spottiswoode & Co., Printers, New-street Square, London.







